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Between Geographical Proximity and History: How
Generation Z Evaluates and Interprets EU Sanctions
Against the Russian Federation post-2022

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Abstract

This master's thesis evaluates how geographical proximity and historical ties shape the perceptions of European Generation Z citizens regarding European Union sanctions against the Russian Federation following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions have become a crucial part of foreign policy, and for their long-term usage, public legitimacy is an important and under-researched aspect.

The research utilises a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, with the main focus on 21 original interviews with young citizens across the whole European Union. Respondents have been divided into two groups: people from the states that were closer to the borders with Russia and the ones their countries were far away. The study examines whether the proximity and post Iron curtain historical experience create a higher urgency and support towards restrictive measures against Russia.

Key findings in the interviews that are also supported by secondary sources from the Eurobarometer 101 surveys suggest that, while sanctions are generally supported quite highly in all EU regions, the motivation and intensity differ significantly. Citizens from the closer state showed a higher sense of urgency because they see the conflict through the lens of intergenerational memory, where Russia occupied and oppressed their nations and they are worried that they could be next. Several respondents from the close states even advocated for stricter measures. On the contrary, citizens from the far states tend to see the conflict as a conflict that is relatively far away and more of a geopolitical issue. This results in lower personal concern, but the support remains strong due to moral integrity.

Apart from that, data shows that citizens are accepting of higher living costs, such as higher energy prices, and are willing to endure such hardship for a long time as a moral obligation opposing Russian aggression. This research helps to better understand how spatial and historical context mediate public opinion and EU foreign policy actions in an increasingly more polarised world full of Russian hybrid war.

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Keywords

European Union, Sanctions, Russia, Generation Z, Geographical Proximity, Historical Memory, Public Opinion, Threat Perception

1. Introduction

Economic sanctions have become one of the most important instruments of foreign policy (Eland, 2018). They are often positioned between diplomacy and military force as a middle ground, as they allow states and international organisations to pressure a target actor without pushing it into an officially armed conflict. Over the past decades, it can be observed that sanctions have increasingly been used on the international stage as a response to violations of international law (Ridi & Fikfak, 2022). As the largest political and economic actor on the European continent, the European Union has emerged as one of the most active users of economic sanctions, making them a stable component of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (Rusell, 2018).

After the Russian aggression in Ukraine, there has been extensive attention and prominence towards sanctions. As a response to a clear violation of international law, the EU has adopted a series of unprecedented measures that would target not only the Russian economy but also Russian individuals (Nordenberg, 2025). Those measures had several aims and objectives, with weakening Russia's ability to wage war and signalling political condemnation of the invasion being just a few of those (Portela et al., 2021).

Although the initial design for those sanctions was at the high institutional level, their long-term future highly depends on the support of EU citizens (Garri, I., 2010; Martín & Indelicato, 2025). This research focuses on the relatively under-researched demographic of Generation Z, referring to individuals born after the mid-to-late 1990s (Dimock, 2019). This generational perspective is particularly relevant because Generation Z constitutes the future electorate and will increasingly shape the political direction and foreign policy preferences of the European Union. Furthermore, their understanding of international politics is formed in a highly digitalised information environment shaped by social media, fast-paced communication, and algorithmic curation rather than traditional institutional gatekeepers (Singh & Dangmei, 2016).

This study is basing its findings off a qualitative approach. It combines 21 original interviews and then compares them to data from Eurobarometer 101. By doing so, several patterns regarding public attitudes towards sanctions. The findings presented in the analysis section show that geographical proximity and historical experiences influence levels of perceived threat and the degree of engagement on this topic. This thesis contributes to broader understandings of sanctions and does so by combining qualitative insights with broader quantitative trends.

This thesis follows a logical structure, with chapters arranged in sequence. The structure was designed to systematically investigate and analyse public support for economic sanctions with a specific focus on Generation Z and their motivations. The following chapter introduces the key definitions and concepts used throughout the thesis. It begins by defining sanctions and detailing their different types. Following that is a distinction between “close” and “far” states. In this part, the process behind EU sanctions is also discussed. Later, there is a relevant literature review that also combines current scholarly gaps, which proceeds into the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework. After stating the Research Question, the thesis proceeds to the Hypothesis part, where all initial assumptions are stated. In the Methodological Approach, all the data collection and themes are presented. This leads into the analysis, which presents the core findings of this paper. That section focuses mainly on historical and proximal context, although it also presents different outcomes. The thesis finishes with chapters, Discussion and Conclusion that reflect on the literature and present discoveries.

2. Defining sanctions

2.1 Definition and Types of Sanctions

In this section, utilises the definition and knowledge provided by “Jentleson, B. W. (2022). *Sanctions: what everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press.” Bruce Jentleson is one of the leading scholars on sanctions. He is a professor at Duke University. Apart from teaching, he obtained experience while serving in numerous positions in the US foreign policy.

Sanctions, as it is known today, have evolved and become one of the most frequently used instruments of foreign policy, as they have their place right next to diplomacy and the use of military force. As Jentleson (2022) defines them, “sanctions involve the actual or threatened denial of economic relations by one or more states or international actors to influence the behaviour of a target actor.”

What sanctions can target are, most importantly, states, but also specific sectors of an economy, or individual actors such as political elites, businesses, or even non-state groups (Alexander, 2009).

Sanctions can take multiple forms depending on the type of restriction imposed. Still, the most common ones are trade sanctions, including export embargoes and import boycotts aimed at restricting commercial exchange with the target state (Jentleson, 2022).

Financial sanctions are also widely used and may involve freezing assets within the sender's jurisdiction, limiting or prohibiting banking transactions, and restricting investment flows. Suspension or conditional limitation of foreign aid, travel bans that restrict mobility between states, or sector-specific measures that include sport or cultural bans or limitations that exclude athletes or performers from international participation are other widely used types nowadays. While these different types vary in scope and severity, the same objective is being shared, which is exerting political pressure by restricting access to economic, financial, and symbolic international networks (Jentleson, 2022).

Sanctions that apply broad restrictions on economic relations with a target state and that affect a large segment of the economy and population are called comprehensive sanctions. (Alexander, 2009). However, the humanitarian consequences of such measures, most notably during the UN sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s following the Gulf War, led to significant criticism of comprehensive sanctions regimes. The severe humanitarian impact contributed to what scholars describe as a "legitimacy crisis" of sanctions and prompted calls for more selective approaches (Ballbach, 2022).

In response, the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council emphasised that future sanctions regimes should minimise unintended harm to civilian populations and instead focus pressure more precisely on those responsible for objectionable actions. This led to the development of targeted (or "smart") sanctions, designed to concentrate restrictive measures on specific actors or sectors as well as resources, rather than entire national economies (Ballbach, 2022).

Beyond their design, sanctions are also shaped by the objectives they are intended to achieve. Sanctions are typically imposed for reasons such as deterring aggression, preventing human rights abuses, addressing violations of international law, countering the proliferation of weapons, or influencing internal political behaviour (Peksen, 2021). In terms of policy objectives, Jentleson (2022) distinguishes between primary and secondary goals of sanctions. Primary objectives focus on changing the target's behaviour, such as limiting military capabilities, deterring further aggression, or compelling a shift in foreign policy. Secondary objectives include signalling resolve, affirming international norms, and deterring other actors from engaging in similar behaviour. In practice, sanctions frequently pursue multiple objectives simultaneously, even when immediate policy change is unlikely (Giumelli, 2013). Examples in international relations include:

UN sanctions on Iraq (1990–2003), which were aimed at hindering Saddam Hussein's military capabilities. (Giumelli, 2013; Morgan et al., 2023)

EU and US sanctions on Russia (2014–present) in response to the annexation of Crimea, which targeted sectors such as finance, energy, and individuals. (Giumelli, 2013; Morgan et al., 2023)

In addition to their design and objectives, a key debate in the literature concerns how effective sanctions are, and whether they function primarily as coercive or symbolic tools. Lektzian and Sprecher (2007) argue that sanctions can function as a strategic alternative to military conflict, rather than escalating directly to the use of force, states may impose sanctions to attempt to alter a target's behaviour while avoiding the high costs and risks of war. In this sense, sanctions are not merely rhetorical tools but part of a broader bargaining process in which states communicate seriousness and impose tangible economic pressure (Lektzian & Sprecher, 2007).

At the same time, Walentek (2019) explains that sanctions have a symbolic side. In his theoretical framework, he highlights that when countries cooperate with each other in a multilateral way, this can generate domestic benefits for political leaders, which means that joining global coalitions allows governments to show citizens and their own voters that they align with global international norms and condemn breaking it. From this perspective, the success of a sanction is not just measured by how much it damages the target state's economy. Instead, its value also lies in how it strengthens political unity at home and displays solidarity abroad.

Consequently, the literature shows that sanctions serve a dual purpose: while they are designed to exert concrete pressure in international relations, their future and long-term support depend both on their symbolic power and a strong moral condemnation.

2.2 Definition of “close” and “far” states

The categorisation of EU member states into “close” and “far” groups was developed through a combination of relevant literature review and insights gained during the pilot interview phase. The pilot interviews have indicated that respondents from bordering states often expressed views and threat perception issues similarly to individuals from countries that have shared Soviet historical experience.

For this study, “*close states*” are defined as countries that either share a geographical proximity to the Russian Federation or have a historical experience connected to the former Soviet sphere of influence and the Iron Curtain. These include Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland.

The category of “far states” refers to countries without a shared border with Russia and without a post-communist historical background. These include Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Ireland, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Malta, Cyprus, Italy, Luxembourg, Greece, as well as the former Yugoslav EU member states, Slovenia and Croatia.



Source: [google.com/maps](https://www.google.com/maps); modified by authors, including the addition of classification lines and labels.

2.3 The evolution of Economic Sanctions

During the immediate post - WWII and early Cold War, the United States emerged as a leading sanctioning actor (Morgan et al., 2023). Nearly one-third of all implemented sanctions during that period were imposed by the US. Roughly 60 per cent of early Cold War measures were just broad trade and arms embargoes (Morgan et al., 2023). Those

measures were adapted against Soviet bloc states, China, and Cuba with a straightforward goal of destabilising opposite political regimes (Morgan et al., 2023).

By the mid -1970s, the so far hegemony of the US had faced new challenges. Western Europe and Japan have started to recover after the conflict, and there have also been domestic vulnerabilities coming from global economic shocks. Those times also mark the start of the coordination of the European Economic Community (EEC). Legally, the U.S. expanded its sanctioning architecture via the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) of 1977, which gave the executive branch, in times of crisis, power over foreign policy. That was a shift as foreign policy was part of the legislative branch so far (Morgan et al., 2023).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a general movement of initial optimism for an international order that would be shaped by multilateral organisations. The 1990s quickly became known as a decade that was characterised by high frequencies of economic enforcement. Furthermore, the UN and newly established EU have expanded their use of sanctions (Morgan et al., 2023). At the same there have been broader regulations in international law, as the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) made broad trade bans legally and structurally harder to implement. As a result, senders turned away from broad trade embargoes and moved toward restrictions on financial assets and arms transfers (Giumelli, 2013; Morgan et al., 2023).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have changed the design of economic sanctions. This period is defined by the rise of "smart" or "targeted" sanctions (Giumelli, 2013; Morgan et al., 2023). Advancements in digital information technology enabled financial systems to track and process immense volumes of global transactions in real time. Even though the target sanctions minimise humanitarian crises and broad civilian suffering, there has been a massive surge in sanctions. That has culminated in unprecedented multilateral restrictions against Russia following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Morgan et al., 2023).

Following the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has developed a mechanism where member states navigate security decisions within a unified legal framework (Giumelli, 2013). In EU jargon, sanctions are formally termed "restrictive measures" and are primarily executed through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) frameworks (Giumelli, 2013, p. 11). The decision-making is strongly consensual and involves multiple actors and institutions. Starting with proposals that originate from member states of the High Representative, they are debated within geographical working groups and the Political and

Security Committee (PSC), and are subsequently legally refined by the Foreign Relations Counsellors Working Group (RELEX) before final approval by the Council of the European Union (Giumelli, 2013).

2.4 Types of EU sanctions

Biersteker and Portela (2015) identify three main types of EU sanctions, which are based on how they relate to other actors and other international sanctions.

First, the EU can act as an implementer of United Nations sanctions. Sanctions decided by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter allow the UN to respond to threats and international peace (Kirakosyan, 2023). This is a case where the EU does not make the sanctions on its own, but rather implements the sanctions that are already made by the UN into EU law. For example, the EU followed and expanded UN sanctions against North Korea in response to its nuclear weapons programme (Ballbach, 2022).

Second, the EU can adopt sanctions that support existing UN sanctions. Those measures are usually meant to strengthen the UN's actions. For example, the EU might add additional individuals or organisations to the list that was already made by the UN. However, there is a debate in the literature about whether the EU can go beyond the UN. Some argue that UN sanctions are only a starting point, so the EU can add stronger measures if needed. Others believe that the EU should not go further than what the UN has agreed, in order to keep international actions consistent (Biersteker and Portela, 2015).

Third, the EU can impose sanctions as an independent policy tool. This usually happens when the UN Security Council cannot agree on a course of action. This type is mostly used to show disapproval of actions that clearly violate international law and standards, and to defend EU values (Biersteker and Portela, 2015).

2.4.1 Characteristics of EU Sanctions

EU sanctions have several key characteristics that distinguish them from sanctions from other actors.

First, they are considered to be mainly targeted sanctions. That means they are aiming at particular individuals or entities. Focusing on this aspect, EU sanctions have created a shift from embargoes that would unintentionally target civilians, which would result in creating humanitarian consequences (Giumelli, 2013). They are using modern asset freezes and

travel bans. By doing so, the EU aims to penalise political elites who are responsible for norm violations while minimising broader civilian suffering (Giumelli, 2013; Morgan et al., 2023).

Second, EU sanctions are often described as highly interconnected with other actors and are rarely used in isolation. As Biersteker and Portela (2015) emphasise, measures that are imposed by the EU are part of a wider international sanctions environment. The EU often interacts with actions taken by the United Nations, the United States, and other regional actors. Furthermore, once a restrictive measure is approved via the EU's consensual decision-making process, it becomes immediately and strictly legally binding under supranational EU law (Giumelli, 2013). This requires uniform transposition and enforcement across all member states, eliminating the risk of individual nations creating legal loopholes that targets could exploit (Giumelli, 2013).

Third, they are often characterised by their political function, meaning it is often used as a tool to signal disapproval for breaking international law and norms. In this sense, sanctions form part of the EU's broader foreign policy identity as a normative actor (Portela, 2012). When the EU is implementing autonomous sanctions against regimes such as Belarus, it usually sends a broader message. The EU communicates its commitment to democratic values to both its internal domestic constituencies and the international community, actively stigmatising norm-breaking behaviour even when immediate behavioural changes from the target are unlikely (Giumelli, 2013)

Finally, EU sanctions are often quite flexible and can be adjusted based on behaviour and changes in the actions of a targeted actor. Their design often includes multiple instruments, which can include arms embargoes, travel bans, and economic restrictions. They are intended to work together as part of a coordinated policy approach (Giumelli, 2013; Biersteker and Portela, 2015). This multidimensional design allows the EU to pursue multiple strategic objectives at once: using financial bans to *constrain* a target's physical and material capabilities, while utilising travel bans and diplomatic restrictions to *signal international* solidarity and norm enforcement (Giumelli, 2013)

2.4.2 EU sanctions decision-making process

Sanctions within the EU are adopted as part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The legal basis for those measures is established in the Treaty of the European Union (Giumelli, 2013). While the EU frequently implements sanctions mandated by the United Nations Security Council, it also has the capacity to adopt autonomous measures in

pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. Given their implications for the internal market, economic and financial sanctions are implemented through Council regulations under Article 215 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, whereas other measures, such as travel bans or arms embargoes, can be enacted directly via Council decisions. (Giumelli et al, 2021)

Initial proposals are typically introduced in the Foreign Affairs Council, after which they are examined in more detail by the Political and Security Committee (PSC) (Giumelli, 2013). Subsequently, the proposal is analysed within relevant Council working groups, where representatives of the member states negotiate the scope and targets of the sanctions. During this stage, officials determine which individuals, organisations, or sectors may be included in the restrictive measures and develop the reasoning behind such listings. The European External Action Service (EEAS) plays an important advisory role by suggesting potential measures. The proposal is then further refined within the Foreign Relations Counsellors Working Group (RELEX), where the detailed legal and technical aspects of the measures are negotiated (Giumelli, 2013).

Before adoption, the proposal is reviewed by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER II), which prepares the decision for formal approval by the Council of the European Union. The Council ultimately serves as the central decision-making body responsible for adopting EU sanctions. When restrictive measures involve economic or financial restrictions, they must be implemented through a Council regulation under Article 215 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Other measures, such as travel bans or arms embargoes, can be enacted directly through Council decisions. Although the European Commission may assist in drafting and implementing, the authority to adopt and approve sanctions ultimately lies with the Council, after which they are examined in more detail by the respective Council working parties and the Foreign Affairs Council. Once political consensus is achieved, the sanctions must be formally adopted by the Council through a unanimous vote, ensuring collective institutional alignment. Following this adoption, the regulations entered into force immediately upon publication in the Official Journal of the European Union, making them legally binding across all member states (Giumelli, 2013).

2.5 Public Opinion and Perception of Sanctions

The institutional complexity of this legislative pipeline directly influences how European citizens interpret external policies. While the presented literature above focuses on how sanctions function as a policy tool, it is equally important to consider how they are perceived by the public. In democratic systems, which this study focuses on, public opinion plays a huge role in shaping foreign policy decisions because governments must remain open and responsive to their voters. That means that public support is not only a consequence of the sanction itself but also a factor that influences it. (Garri, I., 2010).

Furthermore, just a perception of a sanction plays a crucial role in shaping public support. McLean and Roblyer (2017) describe in their research that individuals are likely to support sanctions if they believe that they are successful, and their real impact plays a secondary role. This suggests that public opinion is rather shaped by subjective interpretations of success that are individually accessed by each individual.

Martín and Indelicato (2025), in their analysis of public support for European Union sanctions against Russia, identify several key determinants of strong support. These include a perception of an individual that the sanctions are defending the core European values, but also a support for the European Union as a whole. It is also mentioned how perceiving Russia as a real security threat plays an important role. Their findings suggest that public support for sanctions does not derive from a single factor, but rather from their combination.

Geographical proximity also plays a crucial role in shaping public support. Geographically closer countries are more strategically interconnected. They can easily become involved in conflict both because of shorter geographical distance and also because of political incentives (Robst et al., 2007). As a result, citizens in geographically closer states are more likely to interpret Russian actions as a direct threat, rather than a distant geopolitical event.

Taken together, the literature presents that support is powered by multiple factors, such as perceptions of effectiveness, or more conceptual factors that influence how information is received and interpreted. Those dynamics are crucial for understanding the dynamics between them.

However, the presented literature rather focuses on the assumption that individuals form these opinions based on a relatively informed understanding of sanctions. This may overlook the possibility that geographical proximity influences how, and what the intensity of support is, which is the gap that this project aims to evaluate. This study addresses it by examining

how Generation Z in the European Union understands and evaluates sanctions and how that affects their opinion.

2.6 Disadvantages and limitations of sanctions

Despite their thorough use in modern diplomacy, economic sanctions are frequently criticised for their inefficiencies in resolving international crises. Scholars suggest that sanctions do not necessarily reduce the likelihood of militarised conflict (Drezner, 2003). According to Lektzian and Sprecher (2007), governments often design sanctions in ways that minimise economic costs to themselves, which can weaken the credibility of the signal they send to the target state. As a result, sanctions may fail to generate sufficient pressure to change the target's behaviour.

At the same time, sanctions can generate consequences. Once they are imposed, political leaders may face domestic pressure not to withdraw them, particularly in democratic systems where backing down could be perceived as a loss of credibility (Peksen, D. 2019). This dynamic can sometimes increase tensions between states and, in certain circumstances, even contribute to the escalation of potential conflict rather than its resolution (Lektzian & Sprecher, 2007). Rather than paving the way for conflict resolution, this institutional inertia can severely heighten geopolitical tensions, entrenching adversarial positions and actively contributing to the escalatory spiral of a militarised conflict (Lektzian & Sprecher, 2007).

The relevance of those limitations is important to understand the topic. When citizens perceive sanctions as costly or ineffective, as well as potentially escalating regional or global conflicts, they will be less willing and inclined to support them. These limitations further shape how sanctions are perceived by the public, particularly when individuals question their effectiveness or consequences.

2.7 Generational Perspectives and Generation Z

These perceptions may vary across different societal groups, particularly across generations. Generational differences constitute an important lens through which public attitudes toward foreign policy and sanctions can be understood. Generations are not defined solely by age, but by shared formative experiences that shape political socialisation and long-term attitudinal patterns. According to Dimock (2019), Generation Z includes individuals born from 1997 onward and represents the cohort following Millennials (Dimock (2019) emphasises that generational categories are analytical tools used to capture how

common historical and social contexts influence attitudes over time (Dimock, 2019). Thus, generational positioning provides insight into how political events may be interpreted differently across age groups. In this context, Generation Z can be understood as a cohort that has developed within a highly globalised and digitally interconnected environment, where continuous exposure to online information flows shapes not only everyday behaviour but also political awareness and engagement (Singh & Dangmei, 2016).

At the same time, Generation Z is widely described as the first fully digital native generation, having grown up with widespread internet access, smartphones, and social media as integral parts of daily life (Dimock, 2019). This digital embeddedness significantly shapes how political information is consumed and processed. Unlike older generations who relied primarily on traditional media and institutional gatekeepers, Gen Z accesses news through social media platforms, online networks, and algorithm-driven information environments. (Brian D. Loader et al., 2014)

Smartphones have become the primary source of information for younger generations nowadays (Brian D. Loader et al., 2014). In recent years, they have increasingly functioned not only as communication tools but also as the main medium through which young people engage with political events and global developments, including war. As a result, smartphones have become central in shaping how conflict is perceived and experienced in everyday life. For Generation Z, war is streamed through social media platforms, live updates, and video footage, which has created a form of constant and personalised exposure (Holovchak, 2024). Unlike older generations, whose wartime information was largely filtered through traditional media institutions, Gen Z experiences conflict through an internet algorithm (Audette-Longo, T. 2025).

Generation Z is not only characterised by being the first fully digital generation. According to Melissa Deckman in *The Politics of Gen Z: How the Youngest Voters Will Shape Our Democracy*, this generation has grown up in the era marked by the normalisation of school shootings, the existential threat of climate change, and unprecedented challenges to democratic norms. These experiences create a "generational consciousness". As members of this generation mature, they are becoming the primary architects of the political landscape, and they will dictate the future of democratic decision-making and policy priorities (Deckman, 2024).

3. Literature review and contribution

Economic sanctions are among the most extensively studied instruments of foreign policy (Jentleson, 2022). Particular attention has been given to major cases such as a Russian aggression on Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Van Bergeijk, P. A., 2022).

While public opinion on sanctions has received increasing scholarly attention, existing research often exhibits several limitations.

First, studies frequently treat public support as an aggregate national measure, without systematically accounting for generational variation (Onderco, 2017; Alexandrescu, 2022). This is problematic because the historical references and information habits of a 60-year-old and a 20-year-old are fundamentally different.

Second, although geographical context is acknowledged in broader discussions of threat perception, few studies explicitly examine how proximity to Russia or regional security environments shape sanction attitudes at the individual level within the European Union (Onderco, 2017). This study challenges the idea of a uniform EU public by exploring how the reality of living near or far from conflict influences opinions.

Third, much of the existing literature relies heavily on qualitative survey data (e.g., Alexandrescu 2022). While this approach allows for a broad generalisation, it does not go into the deep context and reasoning behind each vote. This project, therefore, addresses a critical qualitative gap. It is aiming to address the binary 'support' 'not support' variables. That was done to explore how individuals construct meaning around EU sanctions in their own words.

This project addresses a critical qualitative gap in the field. It moves beyond the simple "support/not support" binary to explore how individuals construct meaning around EU sanctions in their own words.

Generation Z perspectives on the sanctions are underexplored, especially regarding the European Union's sanctions. Generation Z is the first generation that has reached political maturity in a fully digitalised world (Twenge, 2023). This generation has lived their whole pubescent and early adult lives in a world where online and offline environments are extremely interconnected (Alruthaya et al., 2021). This world is controlled by social media algorithms, which can have a huge impact on the way young people interpret politics or overall foreign policy issues (Bossetta, 2019). Unlike other generations, Generation Z is most likely to get most of their engagement and information about politics from the digital environment, rather than traditional means of information flows (Loader et al., 2014). The upbringing of Generation Z is also different. Unlike older generations, Generation Z has not

grown up during communist regimes, the Cold War, or Soviet Union oppression. Their experience is only suffered through intergenerational trauma, not directly, which may influence how they perceive Russia and related security threats. However, this does not imply that this determines attitudes fully. It rather suggests that different information environments may influence which frames become most salient when evaluating EU foreign policy instruments, such as sanctions.

This study contributes to the literature by integrating concepts of geographical proximity, threat perception, and generational input within the post-2022 EU security landscape. By combining qualitative interviews with Eurobarometer data, it seeks to uncover not only the level of support for sanctions but also the interpretative frameworks through which young Europeans understand them. In doing so, the study provides a more in-depth understanding of the European public, also offering insights into the durability and effectiveness of EU foreign policy in the fast-paced and highly digitalised modern world.

4. Conceptual and theoretical framework

4.1 Key Concepts

This study focuses on several key concepts that structure the analysis.

First, *economic sanctions* are understood as the restriction or suspension of economic relations in order to influence the behaviour of a target actor. They can target states, sectors, or individuals and are used as an alternative to military force (Jentleson 2022).

Second, *geographical proximity* refers to the physical distance between a state and a conflict zone, in this case, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. It is treated as a contextual factor shaping how individuals interpret international events (Robst et al. 2007) (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007).

Third, *threat perception* is highly subjective and influenced by individual interpretation. It is defined as the extent to which an individual feels threatened by a situation or how likely it is to affect their security negatively. It is subjective and influenced by both material conditions and individual interpretation (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007).

Finally, *Generation Z* refers to individuals born after the mid-to-late 1990s, who have grown up in a highly digitalised and globalised environment. Their exposure to political information

is often mediated through social media and online platforms (Dimock, 2019; Singh & Dangmei, 2016).

4.2 Theoretical framework

This study draws on several theoretical perspectives, which try to explain how individuals form attitudes towards sanctions. Rather than relying on a single explanatory variable, this framework recognises that public opinion on foreign policy is shaped by a multidimensional process.

This chapter proceeds with five interconnected thematic sections. It begins in Section 5.2.1 by exploring how geographical proximity and historical memory interact to construct subjective security perceptions and threat lenses. Section 5.2.2 and Section 5.2.3 then transition into the structural mechanics of economic statecraft. That includes the foundational divide between instrumental and symbolic sanctions, and analysing how the general public subjectively calculates policy effectiveness and moral legitimacy. Following this, Section 5.2.4 addresses the cognitive limitations of the public, utilising models of political knowledge and delegated trust to explain how citizens evaluate complex trade mechanisms without possessing technical policy literacy. Finally, Section 5.2.5 synthesises these elements through a generational lens, anchoring the analysis in classical generational theory and modern digital communication models to conceptualise Generation Z's unique, algorithmically socialised worldview.

Rather than serving as purely abstract concepts, each of these perspectives is directly applied to the empirical data in the subsequent chapters, where they are further contextualised and tested against the qualitative insights gathered from semi-structured interviews and the quantitative trends from the Eurobarometer.

4.2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Geographical Proximity and Historical Memory

The role of geography, and geographical proximity on International relations is more than just physical distance, although that also creates challenges and immediate strategic concerns. Beyond simple mileage, geography is shaped by the historical and emotional ways that people perceive threats. In Europe, the proximity argument is closely tied to the long history of the relationship between European Union states and Russia.

To understand why physical closeness feels so threatening today, it is worth looking at how Russia has been viewed as the primary enemy in the European mind over the last century.

Since the start of the 1900s, European states and Russia have been stuck in a repeating cycle of distrust. The cycle began with power struggles between the empires at the beginning of the century, and this was later turned into the 'Cold War' where both sides were divided by completely different political ideas (Tsygankov, 2019). According to Tsygankov (2019), this relationship usually goes through phases: it becomes tense whenever Russia feels that Europe does not respect it as a 'great power' or a major player on the world stage.

This cycle does not just stay in history books. Bernhard and Kubik (2014) describe that countries have specific ways of remembering their past and how it is passed down to the next generations. For young citizens in close states, this creates a kind of inherited history. Even though Generation Z didn't live through the Cold War, they grew up hearing stories at the dinner table or learning in school about times when Russia was an aggressor. Consequently, their negative perception of Russia is not a random emotional response, but a structured outcome of their upbringing. In today's events, this memory functions as an interpretive lens. It allows Generation Z to map and match what they have been taught in the real world. This transforms the war in Ukraine into a personal and existential threat rather than a distant geopolitical conflict.

Despite the fact that being far away from the potential aggressor works as a psychological buffer against immediate military attack by stronger nations, it does not mean that the countries that are further away are politically disengaged and show lower policy support. Instead, the focus shifts from the survival of your own country towards value-driven alignment with the normative European identity (Martín and Indelicate, 2025). Martín and Indelicate's theoretical insight shows that strong public support comes from an individual's perception that the goal of sanctions is to defend core ideas of the European Union and the integrity of the European Union as a whole.

Similar explanations are offered by Portela (2012), who believes that sanctions have a strong symbolic and political function. She sees them as a tool of a country or an institution to show a strong disapproval for violations of international norms. Sanctions are rarely just practical, material weapons designed to stop an army in its tracks; they are a primary tool used by democratic institutions to communicate powerful collective disapproval when international norms are violated.

From a constructivist point of view, it is argued that a country's identity is not something it is born with or something that is "fixed" by its culture. Instead, identity is relational, meaning it

is created through interactions with others. Neumann (1996) explains that for Russia, Europe has always been the “Other”, and by constantly comparing itself to Europe, Russia created its own values and political direction (Neumann, 1996). As Neumann (1996) explains, Russia is often torn between wanting to follow the European model and wanting to be its own unique empire. This history creates a pattern where any conflict near the European border triggers a deep fear that if an aggressor is not stopped immediately, the war will eventually spread into Western Europe.

The geographical proximity framework, as described in Onderco and Tago (2026), posits that physical distance is a fundamental determinant of how individuals and states perceive and evaluate international conflicts. It is defined not merely as a distance but more as a multidimensional psychological and strategic closeness that individuals feel related to the specific conflict.

This theoretical perspective suggests that regional proximity may function as a main driver for public support through several mechanisms that are interconnected with each other (Onderco and Tago 2026). Availability heuristics, as conflicts that are nearby receive significantly higher media attention. Those are likely to evoke some strong personal responses, which might translate into being more interested in this topic, as higher media coverage creates a deeper understanding and being more knowledgeable about this topic.

This framework accounts for “perceived battlefield proximity”, where individuals may exhibit higher sensitivity to nearby harms, that could be refugee flows or economic damage.

Geography often serves as a multiplier for identity. This also most probably will have an impact on high self-identification with the victim, and that makes the conflict feel more personally relevant. Additionally, the theory features a practical element concerning how efficient an intervention is perceived to be; the public generally assumes that helping a neighbour is more effective and easier to manage logistically than trying to help a country on the other side of the world.

The research shows that people are willing to help other distant countries, but more out of moral principles. For instance, the idea that the aggressor should be punished. Taking that into account, the physical distance is the most important factor in whether people support giving military or financial aid. Furthermore, this suggests that there is some sort of a ‘geographic limit’ to how much the public is willing to support, as their enthusiasm tends to drop when conflict is far away (Onderco and Tago 2026). This “geographic limit” implies that public commitment to global rules is not universal, but rather stops at the edge of one’s own region.

This is further explored in the analysis section, where interview data reveal how these historical parallels and security risks serve as a foundation of support for sanctions. Ultimately, the following analysis will demonstrate how the mentioned theoretical pillars interact to shape a unique generational response after the 2022 aggression in Ukraine.

4.2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Economic Sanctions

The study engages with theories of economic sanctions, particularly the distinction between sanctions as instrumental and symbolic tools. Some scholars focus on how sanctions are used to change the behaviour of an entity in international affairs; there are some that emphasise their symbolic role (Jentleson, 2022). It is important to note that instrumental perspectives focus on the effectiveness of sanctions in the context of achieving concrete policy outcomes, whereas symbolic approaches focus rather on expressing values and maintaining international legitimacy (Jentleson, 2022).

This divide has a direct impact on how individual citizens interpret and evaluate this policy. Rather than assessing trade restrictions through a purely objective, macroeconomic cost-benefit analysis, individuals evaluate them in terms of moral legitimacy and normative appropriateness. They evaluate them in terms of effectiveness and overall legitimacy through the lens of personal biases and other factors that contribute to creating a personal opinion (Pala, T. 2021). In the context of this study, this suggests that Generation Z support for EU sanctions is not based solely on whether the policy is successful. Instead, their support is deeply rooted in how these restrictive measures are interpreted as political and moral statements.

This behaviour is best understood by looking at the European Union's identity as a "Normative Power" (Manners, 2002). Manners describes how the EU's leading influence and role in current global affairs is not coming from primarily military or economic power, but rather from its own ability to define the behaviours of different actors on the world stage. The European Union, by creating sanctions, acts as a normative gatekeeper and, by that, it is legally and morally punishing violations of international law. This theoretical insight helps to understand a major pattern observed across semi-structured interviews. While Generation Z respondents frequently highlight their own lack of technical policy literacy regarding trade restrictions, they surprisingly show a similar commitment to the sanctions regime.

Generation Z EU citizens are supporting sanctions, so they can feel like their daily life is not supporting the aggressor. This psychological benefit is crucial for the generation that often

feels powerless in the face of global conflicts (UNICEF, 2025). Therefore, even when young citizens admit to lacking granular policy literacy, they enthusiastically support the sanctions regime. For Gen Z, the value of an economic sanction lies not in its instrumental ability to instantly stop a kinetic war, but in its symbolic power to grant them individual moral agency and a sense of collective European alignment in an unstable world.

4.2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on the Public's Perception of Sanctions

The framework incorporates insights from public opinion and foreign policy literature, which highlight that support for policies such as sanctions depends not only on their objective outcomes but also on perceived effectiveness, as well as personal cost (Martín & Indelicato, 2025). Individuals are more likely to support sanctions when they align with their personal view of the world as well as political values, and when the target is perceived as a credible threat.

While the public evaluates sanctions through the lens of their performance, the actual technicalities or macroeconomics of effectiveness are rarely the primary metric used by ordinary citizens to determine their success. The actual effectiveness of sanctions is not a crucial variable for the general public in determining how successful applied sanctions are. Most of the time, the general public is not concerned with whether the sanctions reach their goals, such as ending the war or changing the regime of a different nation. The most important metric for the citizens is whether they feel like the sanctions are successful and the target state is being punished (McLean, E. V., & Roblyer, D. A., 2017). Sanctions are distinguished into two primary functions, which are instrumental goals, such as achieving a specific outcome, and symbolic goals, which are about sending a message to the punished state. The public can find sanctions effective, even if they only send a strong message, a moral signal of disapproval (Guimelli, 2011).

As mentioned before, it is important to note that the opinions of the public are not shaped purely by rational cost-benefit calculations that an individual would potentially be doing. It is shaped mostly by subjective interpretations. This means that perceptions of the concept of legitimacy play a central role in shaping support for international policy measures. Even though it is crucial for individuals to understand if the sanctions have an actual impact on the aggressor, they are likely to support the sanctions if they believe it is the right thing to do. It depends on how a person sees the political context and to what extent they see a potential conflict as a topic relevant to their own security and environment (Martín & Indelicato, 2025). When individuals interpret a conflict as a direct or indirect security risk, they are more likely to endorse restrictive measures against the aggressor state. This suggests that threat

perception functions as a key mediating mechanism between international events and domestic public opinion.

In the context of this study, these insights imply that the difference in support for sanctions within the EU is expected to originate not only from perceived effectiveness but most importantly from differences in geographical proximity to the conflict and the degree of threat individuals associate with it. Individuals who feel geographically or politically closer to the conflict are therefore expected to display higher levels of concern and stronger support for sanctions, while those who perceive the conflict as distant are more likely to exhibit lower engagement and weaker policy support.

4.2.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Political Knowledge and Delegated Trust

Political knowledge is often considered a primary factor in shaping public opinion. In the field of foreign policy, the public is not well-informed about the details of technical issues. Zaller (1992) argues that most individuals do not possess fixed opinions on complex international issues; instead, they "receive" information from elite cues and "accept" it based on their existing political predispositions. However, more recent literature presents a shift in these findings. Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) argue that in the modern world, individuals are heavily influenced by digital environments rather than traditional political elites. This gap in technical understanding is particularly evident in the case of economic sanctions. Research by Onderco and Tago (2026) suggests that rather than engaging in a detailed evaluation of these technical policy instruments, the public relies on an "availability heuristic." Their findings indicate that support for foreign policy tools is driven primarily by the perceived geographical distance of the conflict.

This gap in technical understanding is especially evident in the case of economic sanctions. While individuals may lack specific policy literacy, Piattoni (2013) argues that EU democracy often operates on a model of "representation as delegation". In this framework, legitimacy is not derived from constant public deliberation on every technical detail, but rather from a situation where voters authorise experts to act on their behalf.

As Zaller (1992) suggests, when individuals lack deep information on a topic, they rely on "elite cues" from trusted institutions to form their preferences. In the modern context, if the EU is perceived as a legitimate actor, young citizens may just accept its policy decisions, such as sanctions, without feeling a personal need to master the underlying economic or legal mechanics. Consequently, support for EU restrictive measures is not rooted in

individual policy literacy, but in a structured delegation of trust to the experts authorised to manage European foreign affairs (Keukeleire, S., & Delreux, T., 2022).

4.2.5 Generational Theoretical Perspectives in Perception of EU Sanctions

Generational theory provides an additional lens for understanding variation in attitudes toward EU sanctions.

Following up on the literature, a generation is not defined within a strict timeframe based on when individuals were born. Following Karl Mannheim's (1952) foundational work, a generation is formed when a specific group experiences a shared socio-political transformation during their formative years. Recent research suggests that the Russia-Ukraine war creates such a critical time within the European political context. Stolle (2024) shows that the war has produced a significant political realignment in European public opinion, shaping cleavages in attitudes toward support for Ukraine and EU foreign policy responses. Importantly, these divisions are not uniform across society, but are structured in part by political and generational differences in perception and support.

Building on this, it can be argued that the post-2022 security environment may represent an important formative context for younger cohorts, including Generation Z. While it is too early to claim a fully stabilised generational identity, the war can be understood as a major attitudinal shock within European political socialisation that is likely to contribute to longer-term differences in how younger and older cohorts interpret EU security policy and sanctions.

Generation Z, often mentioned in literature as the first fully digital generation (Yılmaz, B et al 2024), is characterised by continuous exposure to international events through social media and online news environments. Rather than relying on traditional news sources or detailed policy analysis, political information is often encountered in fragmented and fast-paced digital environments shaped by algorithmic curation (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014; Holovchak, 2024).

Building on this, research in digital political communication indicates that algorithmically structured media environments foster a unique informational architecture. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) operate under specific algorithms that prioritise continuous user engagement (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In order to keep an individual using the platform as long as it is possible, the algorithm prioritises highly visual, brief, and emotional content over nuanced text or detailed reporting (Holovchak, 2024). This design

changes social media in order to trigger immediate psychological and emotional responses such as outrage, fear, or moral solidarity (Papacharissi, 2015).

This research builds on digital political communication that suggests that algorithmically structured media environments are contributing to exposure that is selective exposure. It also boosts fragmented attention, where users are more likely to encounter simplified and rapidly circulating interpretations of complex foreign policy issues (Holovchak, 2024). In the context of this study, the data confirms that this can have an impact on young individuals, who mostly gather information in this way daily. The mentioned components may influence how individuals form opinions not through detailed policy understanding, but through repeated exposure to simplified content.

However, this does not imply that Generation Z is politically disengaged. Instead, it suggests that political attitudes are shaped through different informational logics compared to previous generations. In relation to this study, this framework helps explain why support for EU sanctions may vary not only according to perceived threat and geographical proximity, but also according to how individuals are exposed to and process information about the conflict in digital environments.

5. Research question

This thesis research question is “How do Generation Z EU citizens evaluate and interpret EU sanctions in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine after 2022?”

6. Hypothesis

This master's thesis project aims to research how EU Generation Z citizens perceive sanctions that were imposed on the Russian Federation after 2022. The main variables that have been part of the research are as follows: geographical proximity, historical ties, age, gender, and trust in the EU institutions. The hypothesis is supported directly by the research question.

The research question, formulated as “How do...”, is both exploratory and explanatory. The question formulated in this way seeks to examine how different generations, specifically Generation Z, perceive sanctions. The study is examining citizens from different regions and geographical contexts. That helps to identify patterns and seeks to analyse how security concerns might change public opinion.

Generation Z is a generation that is overwhelmed by internet news, social media, and can view war conflicts live from their bedrooms. This makes Generation Z unique and, at the same time, great for research. Generation Z in the EU “closed” state is also the first generation that has not lived through the hardship of Russian attacks, occupation, or other threats directly. Generation Z is inheriting national trauma through its older family members and acquaintances. In the research, this trauma will be examined to see how much influence on the Generation Z citizens and their relations to sanctions against Russia.

The research question seeks to investigate whether citizens of states that were defined as close states to the borders with Ukraine and Russia would have a higher level of support and a higher emotional connection with the Ukrainian people. On the one hand, the thesis assumes that citizens from the close states are going to have stronger support for the EU sanctions due to the historical wrongs that Russia has committed in their countries during the 20th century, and would perceive the conflict as a direct threat to their respective nations.

On the other hand, the thesis assumes that citizens from the far states are likely to demonstrate lower levels of urgency and engagement with the war in Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. Russia may seem like a power that is far away, and a possible invasion/influence on its countries might be perceived as less likely. Therefore, the hypothesis also expects them to have lower knowledge on the topic of EU sanctions and EU foreign policy.

H1: Generation Z European Union citizens living in close states will demonstrate significantly higher levels of support for sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, whereas citizens in far states will demonstrate lower levels of support and urgency.

H2: Generation Z European Union citizens living further away will demonstrate lower knowledge regarding the technical mechanisms of EU sanctions and foreign policy than citizens living in close-proximity states.

H3: Intergenerational trauma inherited by Generation Z European Union citizens from older generations in close-proximity states will increase their perceived security threat from the Russian Federation, thereby driving higher emotional engagement and stronger support for EU sanctions.

The assumptions made at the stage of the hypothesis will be further examined in the analysis part. They do not predetermine the outcomes of the study, but rather provide a starting point in this study. These initial expectations will be critically examined at later stages of the project and either supported, refined, or challenged through a systematic

analysis of the empirical data that was collected by a series of original interviews and supported by secondary quantitative data.

7. Methodology

This thesis's main research approach was qualitative, with the support of quantitative data from secondary sources. On the quantitative side, it draws on data from Eurobarometer 101, while the qualitative component is based on a series of original semi-structured interviews conducted with EU citizens. This approach has allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of public attitudes by integrating trends with in-depth analysis of individual perspectives, and at the same time, it has made this thesis profoundly unique in terms of methodology.

The qualitative component of the design relies on primary empirical data gathered through a series of original, semi-structured interviews conducted with European Union citizens representing Generation Z, meanwhile the quantitative component came from the Eurobarometer data. The quantitative component of Eurobarometer data showed us trends around the European Union based on geographic proximity, but the qualitative component helped to fully understand the reasons why and motivations behind these patterns. The interviews gave an opportunity to capture the nuanced, micro-level perspectives of individual respondents, allowing for a deep exploration of the personal reasoning, moral logic, and emotional connections that drive generational attitudes.

Integrating these two methods yields a significant analytical advantage. It allows a quantitative dataset to be directly enriched by the in-depth analysis of the qualitative narratives.

7.1 Research Design

The focus of our study is on an embedded case study design. It is being examined as the main case of European Union sanctions policy, while simultaneously analysing two distinct groups within this case (Budiyanto, C., Prananto, A., & Tan, F. T., 2019). Rather than treating EU sanctions as a different or isolated case, this study understands them as a part of a wider policy that is commonly used in today's international relations in order to influence the behaviour of other actors. In this sense, the case of EU sanctions towards Russia can be seen as a bigger picture contributing to understanding how sanctions function not only within the European Union, but also in a broader context. Within the picked case, the study further examines the embedded units that are based on geographical proximity to Russia. The

picked groups represent different contextual conditions in terms of perceived security threats and exposure to the conflict. By comparing these groups, the study is able to explore how such contextual differences shape individual attitudes towards EU sanctions.

EU sanctions constitute a significant instrument of the EU's external action, particularly in response to the Russian Federation, and have direct and indirect implications for European societies (Portela, 2012). This makes them a relevant and timely case for analysis. By focusing on citizens from countries with varying geographical proximity to Russia, the research captures potential differences in perceptions and levels of support (Vasquez, J. A. 1995).

The study combines qualitative and quantitative elements, although the primary emphasis is based on the qualitative component. The first dimension, the qualitative one, consists of semi-structured interviews that were conducted with selected Generation Z EU citizens. The interviews were designed to gather detailed opinions and reflective responses. They had a flexible format, which has encouraged participants to elaborate on their views, and has rarely revealed insights that went beyond what was expected. Therefore, the qualitative component provides the main basis for the analysis. It offers staple data that offers a way of a deeper understanding of the reasons and motives of the generations.

Meanwhile, the quantitative component, based on the data collected for the Eurobarometer 101 survey, plays a supplementary role in this study. It was used to gain context for the reasoning from the interviews. The Eurobarometer data served as a great secondary source, which helped uncover data from the interviews in the thesis in a much broader context.

7.2 Methods and Data Collection

The reason behind conducting qualitative research was to gain detailed insight into the motivations and reasoning of Generation Z, EU citizens, on how they perceive and interpret sanctions. This method aligns best with the goal of the study, which is not just to gain raw data of the support, but also to understand what participants think and how they justify their opinions.

The recruitment of participants was done through several channels. The process was started by posting on social media, particularly Facebook groups and Instagram. At the same time, volunteers were also mobilised through the support of coordinators from the Buddy

Programme at Aalborg University. Finally, a few interviewees were found through personal and professional networks of the authors. The selection aimed to include the same or a similar number from both analysed groups. This resulted in a total of 21 participants, with 10 respondents from geographically closer countries and 11 from more distant ones. The recruitment criteria were as follows: EU citizen, and part of Generation Z. All participants were aged between 22 and 27. The interviews were done by a diverse range of European nationalities, including Czech, Polish, Bulgarian, Irish, Portuguese, French, Danish, Italian, Dutch, Greek, Estonian, Finnish, and German citizens. Some respondents are residing in their country of nationality (e.g., participants from Czechia, Poland, Finland, France, and the Netherlands), and a big group of participants was living for a short time abroad (1-2 years), particularly in Denmark. The emergence of Denmark as a primary location was due to the recruitment process. Citizens of Poland, Sweden, Bulgaria, Ireland, Portugal, France, Italy, Greece, and Germany have reported living abroad. This was addressed, as participants were asked explicitly whether their current country of residence influences their perceptions. This variation is analytically interesting as it provides a more nuanced understanding of how geographical proximity and national backgrounds interact in shaping perceptions of sanctions and conflict.

Preliminary patterns in the data indicate that the influence of the country of residence is not uniform: while some participants suggested that their views were not significantly shaped by their current location, others have stated that their opinion is being influenced by historical or national context. Although this was taken into account while analysing the collected data, the diversity within the sample provides an important basis for analysing how multiple layers of identity and experience influence individual attitudes, rather than relying solely on a simplified “close” versus “far” geographical distinction.

The focus on Generation Z is theoretically motivated: as the first digitally native generation, their socialisation occurred entirely in a post-Cold War era. They are also hyper-connected in the social media information ecosystem, making their geopolitical perspectives uniquely distinct from older cohorts. Unlike previous generations whose understanding of international conflict was strictly mediated by traditional, scheduled institutional broadcasting, Generation Z consumes global crises through decentralised, algorithmically curated digital networks (Loader et al., 2014).

Table 1: *Demographic and Geographic Distribution of Interview Participants.*

Participant Group	Sample Size (n)	Key Nationalities Represented	Country of Residence
Geographically Closer	10	Czech, Polish, Bulgarian, Finnish, Estonian	Denmark, Home Country
Geographically Distant	11	Irish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Dutch, Greek, German	Denmark, Home Country

Note. Source: Compiled by the authors, based on primary interview data (N=21).

All data collection for this study was conducted online, between 20th March and 16th April 2026. The series of interviews was carried out virtually via Microsoft Teams, which provided a practical solution given the geographical dispersion and participants' personal and professional commitments. The online format had its pros and cons, as it enabled access to respondents from different countries; it may also influence the level of interaction, as sometimes the virtual setting might bring technical difficulties and limit the spontaneity of participants. Nevertheless, participants were generally willing to share their views openly. The duration ranged from approximately 25 to 40 minutes. In addition to addressing the main research topic, questions also included background elements such as age, nationality, and country of residence, and gender in order to establish rapport and better contextualise participants' responses. To eliminate political priming, the question about political affiliation was added purposefully at the absolute end of the interview (see Appendix, Block 7).

All interviews were transcribed using the AI transcription tool provided by Microsoft Teams and subsequently checked and corrected manually to ensure accuracy. To maintain anonymity, all participants were assigned identification numbers (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) in place of their names.

Before the formal data collection period, a pilot phase was executed with three independent individuals matching the inclusion criteria. This phase served to test the construct validity of the interview guide. The sample interviews contained a draft of questions. Feedback from

the pilot phase revealed that overly abstract political terminology caused participants to withdraw or give rehearsed answers. Consequently, the interview guide was refined: abstract questions about "macroeconomic sanctions" were rephrased to focus on lived experiences, such as energy costs, inflation, and media consumption habits.

Upon those refinements, the finalised form of the interview was based on thematic topics (see Appendix). While the foundational blocks were administered uniformly to all participants, the guide introduced a conditional screening mechanism in its advanced policy sections. To avoid participant fatigue and maintain the integrity of the data, advanced analytical questions regarding the normative versus economic utility of restrictive measures were applied conditionally, targeting only respondents who demonstrated a baseline technical literacy in preceding blocks (see Appendix, Block 4).

The data was analysed by using a thematic analysis approach. The whole process was carefully followed by several structured steps. Firstly, all interviews were read multiple times in order to familiarise ourselves as much as possible with their content and identify the initial patterns. Secondly, an additional file was created in which specific segments were assigned descriptions that reflected the main ideas that were expressed by participants. For example, statements expressing concern about the war or fear of escalation were coded as "perceived threat," while references to geographical closeness (e.g., "we are close to Russia") were coded as "proximity awareness." In contrast, statements suggesting emotional distance or limited personal relevance (e.g., "it does not affect me directly") were coded as "low perceived relevance". In the next stage, relevant and related segments were grouped into broader themes, which later emerged as thematic codes. The analysis followed a hybrid coding process involving two types of codes:

1. Pre - established codes: those were created based on the initial hypothesis that geography and history are primary drivers for support.

Those included: *Proximity Awareness*: Statements directly linking safety to geographical distance from Russia (e.g., "I was scared because it is so close to my country"). *History*: References to the post-Soviet past or "Iron Curtain" experience as a reason for supporting sanctions (e.g., "History plays a bigger role than geography"). *Cost analysis*: Responses evaluating the personal impact of inflation and energy prices (e.g., "mostly gas prices, that's what I notice the most"). *Trust in the EU as a*

whole: Statements indicating faith in EU expertise (e.g., "I trust them fully... I assume they are experts").

2. Emergent codes: these were not part of the original plan; they appeared frequently in the interviews.

Those included: *The knowledge- support paradox*: This has emerged when multiple respondents have admitted to knowing “almost nothing”, while offering “100% support”. *Normalisation*: Several participants have noted that over time the war became a “normal, everyday topic”, or that people “got used to it”. *The social media algorithms*: Instead of traditional news, Gen Z described a habit of getting information from social media algorithms (Instagram, X, TikTok). *Indirect threat*: While many did not fear a direct military attack, almost all respondents identified an emergent fear of indirect influence through cyber attacks or fake news “Cyberattacks are certainly possible, and I believe they are already happening. “; “Not militarily. Maybe cyberattacks, but not a direct war.”; “Yes, especially through cyberattacks and other indirect means. I think the risk of conflict exists.”

An overview of this thematic coding, including conceptual definitions and raw exemplar data, is systematically mapped out in Table 2.

Table 2: *Thematic Analysis Coding.*

Code Type	Code Label	Conceptual Definition	Exemplar Quote from Interviews
Pre-established Codes <i>(Deductive/Theory-driven)</i>	Proximity Awareness	Statements directly linking personal safety or threat perception to geographical distance from the Russian Federation.	<p><i>"I was scared because it is so close to my country." (Respondent 2, Poland)</i></p> <p><i>"...Finland shares a long border with Russia... It highlights how near we are to both the conflict and Russia." (Respondent 19, Finland)</i></p>

	Historical Ties	References to the post-Soviet past, the "Iron Curtain" experience, or collective memory as a justification for supporting sanctions.	<p><i>"History plays a bigger role than geography." (Respondent 1, Czechia)</i></p> <p><i>"People who have experienced that kind of oppression tend to recognise warning signs more easily... they are rooted in collective trauma." (Respondent 17, Estonia)</i></p>
	Cost Analysis	Rational economic evaluations regarding the personal impact of inflation, supply chains, and rising energy prices.	<p><i>"Mostly gas prices, that's what I notice the most." (Respondent 4, Poland)</i></p> <p><i>"...fuel prices went above €2 per litre for diesel at one point... rental prices increased. These changes were also connected to broader inflationary trends." (Respondent 3)</i></p>
	Institutional Trust	Statements indicating explicit faith in the expertise, legitimacy, and decision-making of European Union institutions.	<p><i>"I trust them fully... I assume they are experts." (Respondent 1, Czechia)</i></p> <p><i>"Around 90–95%. It's not easy to make decisions, so I trust they are doing their best." (Respondent 4, Poland)</i></p>

<p>Emergent Codes<i>(Inductive/ Data-driven)</i></p>	<p>The Knowledge-Support Paradox</p>	<p>Instances where respondents explicitly admit to lacking technical policy literacy while simultaneously offering absolute support for the sanctions regime.</p>	<p><i>Admitting to knowing "almost nothing," while offering "100% support."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm not fully aware of all the sanctions, but in general I think it is good to pressure Russia into ending the war... I only have a general understanding."</i> (Respondent 20, Germany)</p>
	<p>Normalisation</p>	<p>Shifting perceptions where the ongoing kinetic warfare transitions over time into an ordinary, desensitised "everyday topic."</p>	<p><i>Participants noted that over time, people "got used to it."</i> (Respondent 1, Czechia)</p> <p><i>"At first, when it started, I was a bit scared... But now, I wouldn't say I don't care, but it has become more of a normal, everyday topic."</i> (Respondent 2, Poland)</p>
	<p>Social Media Algorithm Reliance</p>	<p>A generational habit of consuming decentralised, fragmented news via automated curation algorithms (TikTok, Instagram, X) rather than traditional news platforms.</p>	<p><i>Describing a habit of getting information from social media feeds.</i></p> <p><i>"They often post snippets on Instagram or TikTok, and then I read the full articles... platforms like Instagram inform me even faster... I often learn about world events through memes..."</i> (Respondent 7)</p>

	<p>Indirect Threat Perception</p>	<p>A cognitive shift away from fearing a conventional military invasion toward anticipating modern hybrid warfare, such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.</p>	<p><i>"Cyberattacks are certainly possible, and I believe they are already happening... Not militarily."</i> (Respondent 3, Poland)</p> <p><i>"I don't think there will be a direct military attack... This could include information warfare, cyberattacks, or online manipulation, such as trolls influencing the political climate."</i> (Respondent 19, Finland)</p>
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Note. Source: Compiled by the authors based on the qualitative thematic analysis research phase.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent before participation and were informed about the purpose of the study.

Furthermore, steps were taken to minimise researcher bias in the interpretation of qualitative data. The material was initially analysed independently before findings were compared and discussed collectively.

7.3 Limitations

This study faced several limitations, which were connected mainly to its methodological part. Interviews were held online, which was crucial because it allowed for a broad participation across several locations. Therefore, the sample is international and very diverse. Needless to say, online interviews could not facilitate the same level of rapport as in-person interviews might have allowed. A couple of participants were known to the researcher, while others were not; this could potentially facilitate smaller openness during the interviews, but could also lead towards potential bias. This was taken into account during data analysis through a reflexive approach.

Another limitation comes from the subjectivity of qualitative research. Despite high efforts to minimise researcher bias by approaching each interview individually, before the collective discussion, there is a possibility of a slight influence of personal viewpoints and assumptions in the coding and interpretation process. To ensure credibility and consistency, during the analytical part, the data were regularly revisited, and at the same time, to enhance credibility, detailed documentation of analytical decisions was maintained. Nonetheless, complete objectivity remains difficult to achieve in qualitative studies. To mitigate the bias, several steps were taken. First, it was ensured that neutral prompting was maintained when using open-ended questions, such as “How do you feel about it...?” rather than “Do you agree with this statement...”. Second, it was ensured that at the beginning of each interview, it was emphasised that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers, even if that would equal answers such as “I do not know”.

Several participants were known personally before the research, although this could have resulted in potential bias, it is considered that the ‘insider’ status gave a significant advantage in facilitating rapport. The depth of data is often dependent on the level of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee, and as the foundation of trust already existed, participants were arguably more willing to express their opinions.

The series of interviews included exclusively participants from Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2010 (Dimock, M. 2019). This focus has allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of an interesting generation that remains understudied; it also limits the generalisability of the findings. However, the absence of other age groups makes it impossible to draw comparative conclusions or assess whether the identified attitudes are specific to Generation Z or reflective of broader societal trends.

It also came across some conceptual challenges that meant, in particular, defining “close” and “far” states in the context of geographical proximity to the Russian Federation. Initially, it was difficult to establish a clear division between these categories. After conducting pilot interviews and consulting relevant literature, it was defined that close states are considered as countries from the post-Soviet bloc, the former Iron Curtain, and those sharing a border with Russia, including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic & Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany, and the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). Finland was

additionally included as a bordering state, as it shares security concerns and threat proximity with mentioned above states. Additionally, Germany was classified as a “far state” due to a combination of limited comparative literature on this topic within Eastern and Western Germany and the low availability of participants who would classify themselves specifically from Eastern Germany.

Another significant limitation was language and linguistic frameworks. While the sample was inclusive and covered thirteen different European nationalities, all semi-structured interviews were conducted entirely in English. That language has served as a second language for the vast majority of participants. All participants have a high level of the English language, at least at the C1 level on the Cambridge scale. Despite that, minor difficulties appeared in explaining the geopolitical concepts and ideas about international law in detail. All in all, it was acknowledged that participants may have lacked the precise vocabulary to express deep structural nuances, leading them to rely on simplified phrasing or more generalized assertions.

This study also presents only a small period of time, public opinion captured between March 20th and April 16th, 2026. In a fast-changing international scene, it is acknowledged that threat perception and opinions can fluctuate rapidly based on many factors. This limits the long-term durability of collected data. A shift in international affairs in a few months could fundamentally alter how participants would answer the same set of questions.

A notable characteristic of the empirical sample group is that several participants were recruited via the Buddy Programme at Aalborg University. That indicates a degree of intra-European academic mobility. A significant portion of interview participants were temporarily residing in Denmark, which, by the definition provided in the earlier stages of the thesis, is considered a geographically “far state”. Although this limitation has occurred, this factor does not undermine the geographical and historical categorisations of the study framework. It is worth mentioning that political socialisation, identity formation, and inheritance of intergenerational trauma are deeply rooted in their nationality, as all the participants were born and raised in their home countries. The digital environments through which they maintain contact with home further insulate these internalised cultural and historical threat perceptions. That has ensured that their evaluations of EU policy remain tied to their primary national realities rather than their temporary geographic location in Denmark.

8. Analysis

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical part of the thesis with a focus on the individual's perception of European Union sanctions against the Russian Federation following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The analysis examines the factors shaping the attitudes of the citizens, such as geographical proximity, historical ties, threat perception, or cost sensitivity.

The themes have emerged through a process of thematic coding and were developed using both an established theoretical framework and the collected data itself. Although hypotheses and initial themes were created prior to collecting data, the analysis remained flexible, and new themes were created to reflect participants' perspectives. Overall, the initial expectations are confirmed by analysis and collected data, although there have also been revealed nuances that have challenged the initial hypothesis.

Participants from far states were expected to show lower support for sanctions; it has been found that, surprisingly, the support remains broadly consistent across both groups. There is a difference not in the level of support itself, but in how individuals were describing and expressing that support.

The analysis draws qualitative data from original, semi-structured interviews. Our respondents all come from Generation Z, but from various backgrounds as well as nationalities. For this study, it has been decided to divide our respondents into two main geographical sections: the "close" group and the "far" group, based on geographical proximity as well as historical ties. In particular, the following chapter focuses on aspects such as how individuals interpret sanctions, how this relates to their broader understanding of EU foreign policy, and how these perceptions influence their sense of security and perceived impact on everyday life. To support and contextualise the patterns identified in the interviews, Eurobarometer surveys are used as supporting data.

On the other hand, the data are being compared to *Standard Eurobarometer 101 (Spring 2024)*, 77% of respondents support a common defence and security policy among Member States, while 69% favour a common foreign policy. Additionally, 71% agree that the EU should reinforce its capacity to produce military equipment, and 67% consider the EU a place of stability in a troubled world. Support remains strong, specifically in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The survey reports that 72% of EU citizens support economic sanctions against the Russian government, companies, and individuals, while 70% approve of financial assistance to Ukraine. Even more express support for humanitarian aid (87%) and welcoming refugees (83%). Although support is somewhat lower for military-related

measures, approximately six in ten approve of financing military equipment for Ukraine and granting Ukraine EU candidate status.

The analysis is structured around seven major themes that occurred with varying frequency.

1. The impact of geographical proximity and historical context
2. The Relationship Between Knowledge Levels and Sanction Support
3. Social media as a primary source of information
4. Willingness to accept social and economic costs and moral justification
5. Sanctions as a middle ground to war
6. Gender-Based Divergences
7. Shift from direct to indirect threat perception

To provide a structured understanding of these diverse perspectives, the analysis is organised into a thematic progression. The logic of the chapter follows a path from macro factors, which participants cannot change, like their country's geographical location, to micro factors that define their engagement with the policy. The chapter begins by analysing geography and history, which act as a primary filter through which individuals view the conflict. Moving inward, the analysis examines more cognitive and information-based nuances, such as how those individuals process information and how they use their own knowledge about the policy. By the end, the chapter presents how and the amount of trade-offs individuals have admitted to accepting. Finally, the description of gender differences is provided.

8.2 The impact of geographical proximity and historical context

The analysis of the conducted series of interviews data reveals that geographical proximity and historical context act as a primary catalyst for how EU citizens process the conflict in Ukraine and evaluate the necessity of sanctions, and emerge as a primary pattern throughout the interviews. This chapter is going to analyse how the perception of risk appears to be not necessarily uniform across the European Union states.

8.2.1 Geographical proximity

The data that was collected during the interviews suggests a direct correlation between physical distance and the intensity of threat perception, with proximity functioning as an interpretive filter for safety. For those in close proximity to Russia, such as respondents from

Poland, Czechia, Bulgaria, or Finland, the war is still described as a vivid and overwhelming reality that is often associated with feelings of fear or anxiety. One Polish respondent captured this by noting, "At first, when it started, I was a bit scared because it was so close to my country". This statement was a recurring motif among close state participants.

Further evidence of this effect is found in the testimonies of respondents from other border regions. A Bulgarian participant highlighted the physical visibility of the threat, recalling the need to contact families near the Black Sea because the "Russian naval presence is visible" from their hometown. For this respondent, seeing a neighbouring country invaded made the threat feel "more immediate and real". Similarly, a Finnish respondent pointed to the tangible closing of their national border as a constant reminder of the conflict's proximity.

In contrast, respondents from the far regions of Europe, which would include states such as Portugal, France, or Ireland, frequently characterised the conflict as a tragic but remote event that does not fundamentally alter their sense of personal safety. The collected data indicate that distance provides a psychological buffer that allows for a more detached assessment of the situation. For instance, a Portuguese respondent explicitly stated, "Portugal is geographically very far from Russia, so I feel relatively unconcerned". Another participant from the same region noted that "distance reduces my level of concern," admitting that they do not believe Russia could attack their country in the next decade. A French citizen echoed this sentiment of relative safety, remarking, "I don't personally feel threatened or scared that something will happen to France".

This geographical divide is most apparent when respondents use contrast to explain their varying levels of emotional and perceived relevance of the conflict. The data shows that participants are highly self-aware of how their location shapes their empathy. A respondent from Poland remarked that while they feel the weight of the conflict daily, people in a country like Portugal "probably don't care as much," comparing the distance of the Ukraine war for a Western European to how a Pole might view a distant conflict in South America.

Through analysis, another pattern has emerged that was identified as a process that can be described as the 'normalisation of the conflict'. In this context, normalisation refers to a gradual reduction in the emotional intensity and perceived immediacy of the war, as it becomes integrated into everyday topics rather than experienced as an acute crisis. The interview data further support this claim. Participants frequently described the war as having "become more of a normal topic" over time. One respondent noted that while their political

support remains unchanged, the psychological impact has become less immediate: “I wouldn’t say I don’t care, but it has become more of a normal topic... we got used to it”.

What was noticed, interestingly, this process appears across both respondents from geographically close and distant states, though it is driven by different dynamics. In closer states, normalisation seems to characterise getting used to the thought of a conflict happening just outside the borders. Initial reactions were clearly characterised by fear, such as feeling “scared because it was so close” and have, over time, shifted into a more stable perception in which the conflict forms part of the background of everyday life. In contrast, in far states, normalisation takes a different approach, more of a detachment style. As one respondent living in Ireland described, the war is perceived as something happening “over there,” rather than as an immediate threat to personal safety.

When compared, the data from Eurobarometer 101 indicate consistently high levels of support for sanctions, but it does not necessarily capture these more subtle shifts in emotional engagement. Therefore, the findings described suggest that overall high support can coexist with emotional gradual decline of perceived immediacy of the conflict.

While geographical proximity clearly shapes perceived threat, it also structures the emotional relationship individuals develop towards the conflict. The respondents from geographically closer states stated an abundance of reactions that were not limited to basic risk or analytical assessment. They suggest that proximity transforms the conflict from a distant geopolitical issue into an experience that has a psychological background. For instance, Polish participants described this as “at first... I was a bit scared because it is so close to my country” and that the war “felt like it could become another world war”. Fear-based answers were not the only ones. Some respondents also demonstrated forms of emotional attachment through moral and empathetic positioning towards Ukraine. While explicit expressions of empathy were relatively limited, concern for Ukrainian civilians was often articulated indirectly, for example, through statements such as “I don’t agree with killing people” or the view that it is “important not to fund a war through trade”.

In contrast, respondents from more distant countries such as Portugal and Ireland expressed a markedly different emotional orientation, characterised especially by less fear. As one participant noted, “Portugal is geographically very far from Russia, so I feel relatively unconcerned,” while another admitted that the conflict is “...not directly my problem”.

Importantly, those statements are not necessarily indicative of a lack of interest but rather that the issue feels less personally relevant to them. Furthermore, the data reveal that emotional engagement changes over time. Several respondents highlighted how the war has become more of a normal topic.

Despite lower emotional engagement, citizens from far states still expressed high support for sanctions. This suggests that support is driven not by direct threat perception but may be rooted more in moral perception. Nevertheless, these findings lend support to the hypothesis that citizens from geographically closer states perceive conflict as more immediate, rather than citizens of states further away.

8.2.2 Historical Ties

It was observed in the interviews that historical ties act like a giant lens into the thoughts and perceptions of EU citizens. This lens shows us a deeper, more psychological understanding of threat perception, especially for the citizens of the close state. As mentioned before, the close states were chosen not only based on their geographical proximity, but also because of the historical ties. All the countries that have been behind the Iron Curtain or are neighbours of the Russian Federation experienced to some extent oppression, invasion, or full-scale war (Singh, 2025). Even though Russia resorted to a hybrid war nowadays and its moves are rather hidden (Clark, 2020), most of the citizens from close states are still aware of the Russian underlying intentions and perceive Russia as a threat, which is highly connected to the intergenerational historical trauma. One of our Polish respondents confirms it by saying, "These narratives can shape how we interpret current events, sometimes creating a sense that history might be repeating itself".

During the analysis of interviews, it has been discovered that historical experience creates a lower threshold of tolerance for Russian provocative manoeuvres. Respondents suggested that the history of oppression and intergenerational trauma are one of the biggest reasons for such a cautious approach. The Polish respondent commented that participants from close states "tend to recognise warning signs more easily and may be more alert to potential threats" than respondents from the far states. In the far states, Russia is usually taken only as another geopolitical actor. A different but agreeable response came from a Czech respondent who stated that even though geographical proximity is important, history plays a more crucial role. The respondent explicitly stated, "I think history plays a bigger role than geography" because the "Czech historical experience with Russia shapes how people perceive the situation".

The perception of Russia for Generation Z is fundamentally shaped by a combination of formal education (for example, history classes) and intergenerational opinions that are shared from parents and grandparents who have experienced living under Communist influence. What seems to be surprising is how respondents from both close and far states seem to agree on this. Participants from countries like Poland, Czechia or Bulgaria have collectively stated that it is an everyday and identity topic. Bulgarian respondent states that “historical connections matter, but they are transmitted through family, upbringing, and personal environment. That is why they can have a stronger impact than geography alone”. Furthermore, one Polish respondent noted that because they were born in the early 2000s, their understanding “comes largely from stories about the period when Russia had influence,” creating a persistent “sense that history might be repeating itself”. Interestingly, even when respondents were not from regions that had direct Russian influence in the 20th century, they admitted that they imagined that those who “actually lived under Soviet influence” had different views. Although young EU citizens seem to agree on how opinions are passed down through the different generations, they still perceive Russia differently. Even though respondents from far countries still see Russia as a threat, they claim that Russia is not as deeply embedded in the public memory. Respondent from Denmark, for example, mentioned a historical time, when Russia and Denmark worked together, and that historically Denmark was “more focused on Germany as a threat”, while Russia was a bit of a distant affair. French respondents mentioned that they view the situation as “conflict between Ukraine and Russia, not EU and Russia”, also stating that “they do not feel personally threatened”.

8.3 The Relationship Between Knowledge Levels and Sanction Support

The initial hypothesis for this study was grounded in the role of geographical proximity as a driver of public opinion. According to Onderco and Tago (2026), individuals often utilise availability heuristics to evaluate conflicts that are physically or culturally closer to them. This suggests that the “where” of a conflict often matters more to the public than the specific complexities of the “why.” In the context of Generation Z, it was expected that the high media visibility and emotional salience of nearby conflicts would result in a high level of engagement with EU policy responses.

However, the findings from the conducted interviews reveal a significant difference that complicates these theoretical expectations. While the interviews confirmed an intense level

of support for sanctions, they did not reveal a corresponding level of policy literacy. Surprisingly, many of the most vocal supporters were the first to admit they had no technical understanding of the measures. For instance, a Czech respondent admitted that, “I would say I know almost nothing... my opinions are based on limited information,” yet they remained “fully” in favour of the policy. This suggests that the support is not calculated through economic expertise, but it is rather grounded in what an individual believes is a necessary moral response. This gap between support and literacy is best illustrated by the respondents’ inability to provide even a basic technical definition of a sanction. Many participants offered a quite vague definition centred on an idea of a punishment rather than any economic theory. A Bulgarian participant noted they were “not fully aware of all the details” but supported them as a “diplomatic way of handling the situation.” Similarly, an Italian respondent admitted that while they follow the news, they “did not really have these kinds of discussions with people [about the technicalities]”. These results suggest that while proximity generates the high emotional salience discussed by Onderco and Tago (2026), this visibility fails to translate into actual policy literacy.

This suggests that the support for the EU foreign policy is mainly built on delegated trust. The respondents, who were young EU citizens, do not feel the need to be experts in such a field, as they have such people on the EU level who provide enough knowledge. An Estonian respondent noted that they trust the measures because “it’s not easy to make [these] decisions, so I trust they [the EU] are doing their best.” Later, Portuguese citizens have concluded, “I think it is necessary, even though it is difficult... sanctions should remain the strongest tool.” Delegated trust creates a safety net for the EU’s legitimacy. As long as a moral intent aligns with the values of young EU citizens, they are willing to support policies that they cannot fully technically define. This was described by participants in their own words: “Based on what I know, I would say I trust them moderately. I don’t have deep knowledge, but overall, they seem like solid institutions and their decisions appear reasonable.” “... However, overall, I have a fairly strong level of trust in EU institutions. Looking at the last twenty years, I would say I have confidence in around 95 percent of the major decisions they make.” I trust governments to stop at the point where sanctions would seriously damage the basic economic functioning of the country.” “I generally trust them. I do not distrust EU institutions, and I think they are doing reasonably well.” “I think they generally know what is right. There are experts working on these issues, so we should trust them.” “I trust them fully. I don’t feel qualified to judge their decisions, and I assume they are experts dedicated to making the best choices.”

Although it is important to note that not all participants were fully in favour of EU policies. Some described it as depending on topics. “For me, it is about 50–50. I do not fully understand all the complexities of policymaking, so I recognize that decisions are difficult. However, I still have some doubts, especially regarding the future”, and some stated that the EU absolutely is not trustworthy in their opinion “... Not 100%.”

It is important to mention as well that 72% support found in the Eurobarometer 101 is not a reflection of a society that has a high level of knowledge about EU policies, but rather of a public that is supporting the intent of the policy, even though often not being informed about the details of it.

8.4 Social Media as a primary source of information

The interview respondents, who were aged 22- 26, consistently highlighted a shift away from traditional forms of news consumption in favour of social media. The respondents in this study almost universally identified platforms like Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok as their gateways to international affairs.

Czech respondent noted that they obtain information "mostly from social media, especially Instagram," and only turn to online news "occasionally... when something major happens". This can create an issue when the flow of information is constant and quick, but it often lacks depth. This was also confirmed by another participant from Czechia. They pointed out that their knowledge depends heavily on the "algorithm," which provides "relevant information, but it's not very deep". A Bulgarian respondent explained that platforms like Instagram "inform me even faster" than dedicated news apps, adding that they "often learn about world events through memes as much as through traditional news". This shows that while the algorithm is highly effective at keeping users updated on the fact that a crisis is happening, it does not prompt them to look beneath the surface.

Furthermore, a Bulgarian respondent noted that they often learn about events “through memes as much as through traditional news.” Learning about serious geopolitical manoeuvres through memes creates an environment where international relations are viewed through humour or moral binaries. Although news provided by memes makes them shareable and accessible, one cannot explain complex foreign policy issues with a picture. Traditional journalism arguably provides a more objective and structured narrative than fast-paced and algorithm-driven social media. For Generation Z, the high speed of information on social media creates 'awareness' without 'depth.' On the other hand, even in

traditional news, the focus is typically on the moral necessity of sanctions rather than their economic technicalities. This leads to a situation where support is not rooted in a technical evaluation of the policy's success, but rather in a perceived moral necessity, leaving the public to rely on 'delegated trust' in EU experts. This major reliance on social media could also lead to some sort of "desensitisation". As one respondent observed, modern media "prioritises novelty and immediacy," meaning that once a topic is no longer "attention-grabbing," public engagement may decline even if the situation remains unchanged.

This digitalisation of information characterises how the whole generation perceives complex geopolitical issues. Because information is often consumed through social media discussions and "snippets," many young adults feel only moderately or even poorly informed about the technicalities of policy. A French respondent, for example, has admitted to following "Le Monde [and] BBC" but primarily through "snippets on Instagram or TikTok".

It is also worth mentioning how one Finnish participant has noted that the war in Ukraine was the first they "witnessed so vividly through the media," noting that "because of social media, I saw a lot of graphic content," which directly contributed to increased anxiety and a more immediate sense of threat. That was also described in literature, as Holovchak (2024) mentioned how Generation Z is basically watching war through social media, a phenomenon that has no precedent.

Ultimately, for Generation Z, social media became a natural habit that they follow immediate narrative snippets of news daily, without further investigation into details.

8.5 Willingness to accept social and economic costs and moral justification

Interviews showed an interesting phenomenon about sanctions. Most of the respondents answered that they view sanctions primarily as an economic instrument, not just a moral support. However, while Gen Z categorizes sanctions as an economic tool by definition, they evaluate and support them based on moral and symbolic reasoning rather than economic literacy. At the same time, most of the respondents were unable to name and define specific economic sanctions that the EU implemented against Russia.

When the respondents were asked if they were willing to pay higher prices connected to the sanctions, their responses were always connected to the moral arguments across respondents from all EU countries. One respondent even stated, "moral obligation to oppose

oppression, even if it has negative consequences for ordinary people”, while a Swedish respondent added that it is “important not to fund the war through trade”. Despite the rising costs, the data has shown minimal to zero complaints, and many view this just as an inevitable part of the process.

Sanctions are viewed as a short-term solution; one respondent described it as “first aid” to stabilise the situation, before a different energy solution can be found. In close states, the prices have normalised over time. A respondent from Poland mentioned that initial fears slowly moved into silent acceptance, where people got used to the new economic reality. Data shows that respondents from both regions are willing to accept sanctions even with higher prices, and most of them stated that they believe that people are willing to take the costs as long as their “normal lifestyle and basic expenses” are not affected.

Data shows us that the deeper, unspoken motivation for supporting sanctions is different in close countries in comparison to countries further away. As mentioned before, respondents from the close states are concerned about their own nation’s safety. Through close geographical proximity and intergenerational trauma, the Russian Federation is viewed as a real existential threat, not as a geopolitical actor. During the interviews, a pattern emerged that proved that contemporary military aggression triggers a cyclical way of understanding history and heavily cautious citizens. A Polish citizen proved this by saying, “I am afraid that history might be repeating itself.” This perception proves that for citizens from close states, the Russian aggression in Ukraine is not an isolated event, but an imperialistic approach of Russia to its borders, known from history. The Czech respondent even argued, “history is more important than geographical proximity”.

Through a different lens, the conflict is seen by respondents from far states. The geographical proximity managed to keep them calm and not worried about a direct attack from the Russian Federation. Despite that, the overall support of Ukraine is extremely high and a politically highly proclaimed topic. This support comes from the high morals and alignment with a Normative European Identity. Respondents from far states are not afraid of survival, but rather see the support for sanctions as a necessary economic sacrifice to oppose tyranny and maintain European solidarity.

8.6 Sanctions as a middle ground to war

A trend that has also emerged is that many young people view sanctions as a middle ground between doing nothing and actual aggression. Many respondents, rather than viewing them as a perfect solution, described them as something necessary. As one 23-year-old from the

Czech Republic put it, "Sanctions seem like a safer option" because they avoid the extreme violence of a physical conflict. The analysis shows that for many, the real value of sanctions is the ability to show disapproval without actually starting aggression, as many recognise it as a bad morally, but also illegal in light of international law (*U.N. Charter* art. 2, para. 4). Many participants explained that they want the EU to "do something" to help, but they are wary of actions that could lead to a direct military fight. A Bulgarian student shared this sentiment, noting that even though sanctions cause economic trouble, they are "the only way to influence the situation without actually shooting". Ultimately, this reflects and reminds us that diplomatic pressure is far better than the use of physical force, and also makes the perceived safety of such economic measures worth the trade-off that might happen along the way.

8.7 Gender-Based Divergences

This thematic section explores the variations in perception between genders, a dimension that was not initially identified as a primary focus during the hypothesis-building stage of this research. The original research design did not anticipate gender differences in answers.

The data suggests that general support for sanctions is identically strong among both males and females, there are some differences in how that support is expressed and evaluated.

The analysis showed that several male respondents focused more strongly on questions of efficiency, strategic impact, and the overall effectiveness of sanctions. Therefore, with the passing of time, their approach changed, and they would prefer a stronger wave of sanctions. This confirms a male respondent from Denmark who noted that because sanctions were not as effective as initially expected, he now believes that "even stronger sanctions may be necessary". Furthermore, a German male expressed, "We want to influence their behaviour towards ending the war. We try to pressure them financially, for example by freezing assets", when asked why countries would use international sanctions. A Danish male participant also argued that the economic sacrifice was a necessary trade-off for future safety, stating: "In the long term, it is more important to reduce dependence on Russia and strengthen EU resilience... Sanctions are important, but they should be combined with other tools, such as strengthening strategic autonomy."

Many male respondents believed that sanctions should be even harsher and fully push the Russian Federation out of the war financially, even if it affects respondents' wallets. A Czech male respondent added that he would prefer if the EU were "stricter" to ensure the measures would work.

In contrast, several female respondents articulated their support through normative frameworks. Rather than viewing sanctions through economic lenses, they prioritised ethical considerations. For many female respondents, the cost of sanctions was categorised as a necessary sacrifice in order to exchange the current *status quo*. For example, a Polish female admitted, “I mostly support sanctions because I don’t agree with killing people.” This shows that the success and effectiveness of sanctions are measured more through the lenses of following international law and protection of human rights.

8.8 The shift from the direct to indirect threat perception

While geographical proximity has a high impact on the baseline of current existential fear among respondents, a secondary thematic pattern has emerged in the way respondents see the possible attacks from the Russian Federation. Respondents answered almost unanimously, among both close and far states groups, that they are not worried that Russia is going to attack their countries in a typical conventional war. Instead, many do believe that threats from the Russian Federation come through new technologies, shifting from traditional military concerns towards hybrid warfare, such as cyberattacks or disinformation campaigns through so-called bots.

Many respondents even stated that hybrid warfare is not just a possible threat but a reality that is already happening in European countries. One participant observed: “Cyberattacks are certainly possible, and I believe they are already happening.” This sentiment and awareness illustrate that Generation Z’s daily life is hardly embedded in the online environment, and any attack on this environment is recognised and taken seriously.

Even in the far states, where the psychological buffer of living further away from the Russian Federation minimises the fear of traditional warfare confrontation, the apprehension of a hybrid threat remains. Most respondents from the far states doubt the scenario of full-scale warfare, but see the highly probable reality of digital warfare, as noted by a far state respondent: “Not militarily. Maybe cyberattacks, but not direct war.” This clear distinction shows that Generation Z is familiar with the strategic deterrence used by NATO and the European Union. It also shows that Generation Z is aware of the grey area of attacks that the Russian Federation frequently uses (Khorram-Manesh, A., et al, 2023). The threat is therefore reframed as an indirect one, and the frontlines of the conflict are fought on the servers and social media comment sections. Another respondent added: “Yes, (the conflict is possible), especially through cyberattacks and other indirect means. I think the risk of conflict exists.”

As it was mentioned in other parts of the analysis, Generation Z's daily lives and communication channels are embedded within social media. That means that their apprehension of hybrid threats is rooted in intuitive, everyday exposure rather than formal geopolitical education. Although respondents from both groups have admitted to being afraid of potential hybrid or cyber attacks, it was revealed that those attitudes have different foundations.

For close-proximity states, the fear is deeply material and powered by the potential possibility of territorial violations and escalation. This is acutely illustrated by a Czech respondent who explicitly linked their conceptual framework of danger to physical proximity, observing: "If I experienced something like a missile nearby, I would perceive the situation very differently." A Polish participant recalled that the onset of the 2022 invasion caused severe personal distress because "it was so close to my country," inducing an immediate fear that the regional conflict "could become another world war." For these eastern respondents, geography forces a fear centred on the concrete loss of territory and human life.

On the other hand, for far-proximity states, distance allows respondents to experience it through different lenses. Generation Z citizens in countries like France or Portugal completely dismiss the possibility of direct military aggression on their sovereign soil. This is explicitly demonstrated by a French respondent who, when assessing personal safety, confidently minimised physical warfare while highlighting invisible, asymmetric dangers: "A direct military attack, I don't think so. But influence, like cyberattacks, yes. I think that is probably already happening." This reveals that even though the individuals from far states are protected by the mileage, it still does not make distant-state citizens feel completely secure. While close-state individuals fear direct kinetic violence, distant-state youth reframe the conflict as an infrastructural or economic inconvenience.

Despite different regional starting points, the data shows that both groups agree when it comes to recognition of modern warfare tactics. While Generation Z may feel underinformed about the official details of political decision-making, they have a clear baseline awareness of the hidden tactics that the Russian Federation uses. As a result, they see the frontlines of the conflict as having shifted away from physical borders and onto digital servers and social media platforms. This was highlighted by another participant who noted that the risk of conflict exists "especially through cyberattacks and other indirect means."

All in all, the data shows us that one of the added motivations for imposing and maintaining sanctions on the Russian Federation is that, no matter how far from the actual point of

conflict you are, there is still a high possibility of a hybrid attack. Generation Z views cyber warfare and fake news as highly persuasive instruments of Russian power. Supporting EU sanctions is therefore a sensible and legitimate mechanism to constrain a threat that has reached far beyond its borders. Ultimately, this could give Generation Z a shared reason to support sanctions, even without a full understanding of it. The nature of digital warfare is that it does not belong to borders. That means no country is safe from foreign influence.

9. Discussion

9.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study's main goal was to examine how young citizens of the EU interpret and evaluate sanctions in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Beyond simply measuring the level of support, this research investigates the logic and personal reasoning that citizens use to justify these policies. While the findings confirm the high level of support that is demonstrated in Eurobarometer 101, it also shows much more in terms of a deeper understanding of each participant, outcomes that qualitative studies tend to overlook.

The findings indicated that support is not just a reflection of approval of certain foreign policy issues. It is rooted in deeper moral and security-related considerations. Participants often framed their responses in a way that it looked like they saw it as a necessary response to aggression, even though they expressed uncertainty about their knowledge level.

According to the hypothesis, those attitudes may be rooted in the broad intergenerational trauma that European citizens experienced in the 20th century. Despite the fact that this thesis does not directly focus on the measurement of the intergenerational experience, the data point out that the trauma is still deeply rooted even today, and therefore indirectly impacts how younger generations view modern conflicts, especially regarding nations that have historical ties with their home country. The research found that for many young people, the 2022 invasion was not just a single event, but part of a much longer history of Russia being a threat. While the topic of the interview focused on current events, many, especially from close countries, have used their inherited memories and knowledge about history to explain their current feelings. They didn't just see Russia as a modern problem; they saw it as a country that has always been an aggressor. One Polish respondent explained this by saying, 'I think history might be repeating itself,' and the Czech respondent even argued that 'history plays a bigger role than geography' when it comes to fearing Russia.

Meanwhile, the hypothesis was proven to have an impact, and some themes have emerged that were not predicted by it.

One of the most interesting and significant findings of this study is the difference between technical knowledge and the level and how individuals support sanctions. While many respondents openly admitted to not having deep knowledge about this topic, they did not hesitate to have vocal support for it. Participants frequently frame that they see sanctions not in terms of economic mechanisms, but rather as an ethical response to acts of violence. They also mentioned multiple times that sanctions are necessary in order to achieve peace in the international scene. Furthermore, this leads to broader reflection on how political engagement operates within Generation Z, which has been a main focus throughout this thesis. Additionally, as it was mentioned in the analysis part, it was found in conducted interviews that this generation's main source of getting information is social media. When comparing those findings to the literature, it was found that the generation is continuously exposed to algorithmised content that is often simplified (Peréz-Escoda A. & Ruiz-Poveda C., 2026), leading to lower knowledge about foreign policy overall. In this context, sanctions have become more of a symbolic representation of solidarity with Ukraine.

In conclusion, the research question is answered by pointing out that this study goes beyond a simple 'support or oppose' binary. It demonstrates that Generation Z interprets sanctions through a combination of geographical proximity and 'inherited' historical trauma. Ultimately, they evaluate sanctions as a necessary moral response, justifying their support through 'delegated trust' in EU institutions rather than through a technical understanding of economic policy.

9.2 Silences and Absences

While the responses that were gathered in the interviews offer rich insight into how Generation Z conceptualises the geographical crisis, there were some thematic omissions within the dataset that are equally significant. By mapping what respondents choose not to say, it can be traced how the sample traces and understands the topic more in depth. Several empirical absences have emerged across the sample:

Technical and Institutional: When asked if they are familiar with sanctions, respondents routinely use phrases like "I can imagine what they are, but I would not feel confident explaining them," or "I know trade with Russia has been restricted [but not] specific details." *There has* been a complete omission of legal instruments, processes, or enforcement bodies (like the European Commission's role, or asset-freezing protocols). Generation Z, instead of

viewing sanctions as a complex process, respondents conceptualize them as an immediate political mechanism.

Economic details: Most respondents have specifically acknowledged that sanctions have material consequences (e.g., admitting that prices have risen or noting that energy dependency was a problem), but they do not offer any economic details in that matter. There is no mention of GDP impacts or inflation. Despite the deeply economic nature of trade restrictions, the public replaces it with moral discourse. Interestingly enough, the lack of economic details helps to keep public support strong, because people are not judging the policy based on a financial cost-benefit side.

Policy Criticism: Across interview samples, there is little to no criticism of sanctions. Even when explicitly prompted about potential negative domestic consequences or personal economic sacrifice, respondents uniformly declare that maintaining them is "*necessary*," with statements like, "*In the long term, it is more important to reduce dependence... and strengthen EU resilience.*" Because complaining about high prices or opposing the sanctions is seen socially as a failure to support Ukraine, any critical thoughts or doubts are self-censored. Disagreeing with the policy is completely pushed outside the boundaries of what is considered acceptable to say out loud.

Success: When asked about the future or effectiveness of sanctions, respondents frequently note they "haven't stopped the war" or that they "don't know how effective they are", but what is important to mention is that no one has mentioned what a criterion for success would look like.

Personal impact: When asked if the EU's foreign policy decisions affect their daily lives, many respondents openly admit, "I don't really think about it. I take many benefits for granted," or "Not really, I think. No, not much." Even when they agree that sanctions *could* theoretically become too expensive for Europe, they claim that it hasn't reached that point yet. It is almost completely omitted how their own futures or lifestyles might have to permanently change. The financial consequences of the war are seen as an issue to be dealt with by governments or banks, not as a real-life problem that is going to affect daily lives.

The total deficit of detailed policy engagement, institutional literacy, or any critique suggests that sanctions are understood by Generation Z primarily through emotional and symbolic narratives rather than technocratic reasoning. Rather than viewing sanctions as a complex

foreign policy instrument, the public sees them as a binary moral response. This matches what Jentleson (2022) says about how sanctions work. He argues that instead of just being a practical economic tool, sanctions are often used to send a message. The lack of technical reasoning is also illustrated by Martín and Indelicato (2025). They mention that public support for sanctions does not derive from a calculating and complicated assessment, but rather from a fundamental perception that the measures are defending core European values. Furthermore, it can be seen how this dynamic reflects how geographic distance shapes public opinion. Onderco and Tago (2026) describe whether a conflict is physically close or far away; for individuals, military actions, and economic sanctions are treated the same way. Because the respondents are looking at the conflict from a distance, their focus is restricted. Instead of examining the practical, real-world details of how sanctions work, their minds skip straight to broad threat perceptions and moral obligations. Distance allows them to view the policy as a simple moral choice rather than a complex economic puzzle. Moreover, because Generation Z is relying heavily on algorithmically curated social media rather than traditional information sources (Loader & et. al, 2014), young citizens process the conflict through highly emotionally resonant imagery.

9.3 Interpretation

The findings from this study suggest that public support for international sanctions is fundamentally driven by their symbolic and moral utility, rather than an objective calculation of their economic effectiveness. Throughout the interviews, Generation Z participants frequently described sanctions as a “safe” and “diplomatic” way for a response to a conflict, even though they often acknowledged that they have not yet succeeded in ending the war.

This interesting contradiction, which has been observed: supporting a policy that individuals are aware of is only partially effective. The policy is evaluated less by its empirical output (whether the Russian economy collapses or the military retreats) and more by what it communicates about European values, unity, and moral stance. As McLean and Roblyer (2017) argue, the actual instrumental effectiveness of sanctions is rarely the crucial variable for the general public. Instead, the most important metric for citizens is whether they feel like the target state is being punished, allowing the public to view sanctions as effective simply because they send a strong moral signal of disapproval (Guimelli, 2011)

As outlined in the historical framework, the reason for the current relationship between Europe and Russia is their relationship over the last century (Tsygankov, 2019). For the young citizens of the EU, this cycle manifests as a form of “inherited history” passed down

across generations (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014). Even though these young citizens did not experience the Cold War themselves, structured socialisation through family narratives and schooling has passed down a vivid memory of Russia as a primary historical threat.

When the 2022 invasion occurred, this inherited memory functioned as an active interpretive lens. Young individuals immediately matched real-world events that were happening just outside their borders with their inherited history. Consequently, those participants have described the war not as a distant geopolitical threat, but they saw it as a deeply personal existential threat. In this environment, the fear of conflict spreading inside the European Union if the imperial aggressor is not stopped immediately is large. Scholars suggest that geographical proximity and perceived threat significantly shape public interpretations of international conflicts and support for foreign policy responses (Onderco & Tago, 2026). Needless to say, the Russian aggression in Ukraine itself has contributed towards a shift in European threat perception and political attitudes toward security and sanctions (Stolle, 2024).

Under these conditions, the physical distance acts as a psychological lens. As conceptualised by Onderco and Tago (2026), regional proximity triggers availability heuristics and a "perceived battlefield proximity." According to them, individuals exhibit a high sensitivity to immediate regional harms like refugee flows and economic damage. That is why sanctions are deemed as necessary, as they provide a safe choice that does not trigger any military escalation. This aligns with broader literature which suggests that sanctions are seen as an alternative form of coercive statecraft, because they are viewed as less escalatory than military intervention (Giumelli, 2011).

While public enthusiasm for costly military interventions typically drops when a conflict is far away, the data show that support for economic sanctions remains remarkably resilient among distant respondents. This resilience occurs because the focus shifts from the immediate military survival of one's own nation toward a value-driven alignment with a collective European identity (Martín & Indelicato, 2025).

Because the European Union operates as a "normative power" that has the strength to define and enforce acceptable behavior in international relations (Manners, 2002), young citizens view sanctions as a tool to show strong disapproval for violations of international

norms (Portela, 2012). Supporting these measures allows them to disagree with an aggressor, as well as affirm the integrity of the EU as a whole and protect their own sense of moral legitimacy. As indicated by UNICEF (2025), young citizens who frequently feel powerless in the face of global crises find themselves some sort of psychological benefit from sanctions: it assures them that their daily lives and economic consumption are not actively complicit in supporting an aggressor state.

This symbolic and value-driven framing directly explains the structural "knowledge-support paradox" documented in the analysis, where respondents support policies they admittedly cannot define, explain, or track technically. In traditional public opinion literature, Zaller (1992) argues that citizens lack fixed opinions on complex international issues and simply absorb "elite cues" from trusted institutions based on their existing political leanings. In the case of Generation Z's relationship with the EU, this dynamic is stabilised by what Piattoni (2013) terms "representation as delegation."

Because the EU is viewed as a legitimate moral actor, respondents do not feel a personal or intellectual obligation to master those topics. Their individual policy literacy is entirely bypassed and replaced by a structured delegation of trust to authorised experts (Piattoni, 2013). They judge the applied sanctions not by their objective economic outcomes, but by their perceived legitimacy and moral correctness (Martín & Indelicato, 2025). If the trusted institution declares that a sanction is the right moral choice to punish an aggressor, the public accepts it.

Finally, these interpretative dynamics are heavily reinforced by the unique informational logics of Generation Z as a fully digitised generation. As established by generational communication theories, young citizens do not consume foreign policy through traditional, gate-kept media institutions like television or print journalism. Instead, they navigate an algorithmic, fast-paced digital content on social media platforms (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014; Holovchak, 2024). Algorithmically structured media environments contribute to selective exposure and fragmented attention, where users are more likely to encounter simplified, rapidly circulating interpretations of complex foreign policy issues (Holovchak, 2024).

While this digital environment is incredibly effective at broadcasting immediate events, fostering empathy, and creating a powerful public demand for moral solidarity, it is not suitable for fully understanding foreign policy issues. Existing literature suggests that social media environments often encourage emotional engagement, simplified narratives, and

rapid information consumption, which is often a reason for how individuals form opinions (Van Aelst et al., 2017)

9.4 Literature comparison and literature gap

These findings align with existing research that demonstrates strong public support for sanctions across European states, while also extending it. Previous research has largely relied solely on quantitative data (e.g., Alexandrescu, 2022; Onderco, 2017), which are effective in measuring a large number of individuals, but lack the depth that qualitative data brings. The qualitative findings of this study, therefore, add an important interpretive dimension by showing that support is often connected to emotional feelings and the need to respond to perceived aggression.

For instance, multiple participants described their backing of restrictive measures not as a calculated policy decision, but as an immediate, visceral reaction to violence, with one Polish respondent explaining that she strongly supports sanctions simply because she *"did not support the aggression"* and *"disagreed with killing people"*.

This supports the work of Onderco and Tago (2026), who argue that physical closeness to a conflict zone improves support for restrictive measures because the consequences could potentially be more visible.

Furthermore, this research contributes to a debate between the instrumental and symbolic power of sanctions. While scholars like McLean and Roblyer (2017) suggest that public support is connected to the level of success of a policy, the original interviews in this project revealed a different trend. Even when participants acknowledged that sanctions "haven't stopped the war," they continued supporting them. The normative value of sanctions, as was described by Portela (2012), is often more important than their immediate economic impact. This paradox is perfectly captured by a Polish respondent who explicitly stated, "I don't think sanctions are very effective, because they haven't stopped the war, it is still ongoing," yet firmly maintained that the EU should still *"continue with sanctions"*. As a Finnish respondent noted, sanctions are a vital way to *"signal that certain actions are unacceptable"*, proving that public support persists because the policy functions as an instrument of values and collective condemnation, independent of its practical ability to halt kinetic warfare on the ground.

Finally, the study addresses the gap in the generational research. Existing literature on Generation Z often focuses only on their digital habits. Although this is interesting on its own,

this project aims to see how those habits shape foreign policy views. The findings from interviews align with Holovchak's (2024) observations. She highlights how smartphones and social media for Generation Z have become "excessively integrated" in their lives, serving as the primary window through which they witness war. This study's findings mirror this, showing that Generation Z's reliance on digital "snippets" and social media algorithms shapes their understanding of news, but also foreign policy tools such as sanctions.

9.5 Future Recommendations

This study offers important insights of how Generation Z interprets and evaluates EU sanctions against the Russian Federation, but it also opens several critiques that subsequent scholars could expand on. In order to deepen the understanding of foreign policy and public support, future research should focus on the thematic dimensions.

The empirical findings demonstrate that younger EU citizens may interpret sanctions through cognitive frameworks, as their views may be influenced not only strictly by their strong online presence and digital media consumption, but also by historical experiences and memories connected to communism and Soviet influence that have been passed down through generations. The experiences of parents and grandparents during the communist period may continue to shape perceptions of Russia in many Central and Eastern European states.

Further insight could also be provided by studying comparative research between different EU member states. Although a stronger emotional engagement was discovered among geographically closer states, support for sanctions remained high across both close and distant states. Future research could investigate this relationship on a larger scale to better understand what is the role of physical proximity.

Additionally, further research could focus on combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This could be done through larger selected groups of participants. That would allow for broader interpretive depth and generalisability. In the future, there could be research focusing on both geographical proximity and a comparison across different generations. This approach would help determine if the support for sanctions is more influenced by geographical proximity, generational experience, or the interaction between the two.

In future research, focus should be put on the role of social media and digital presence in shaping views on sanctions and modern conflicts, for Generation Z, which already draws news mainly from these sources (Pérez-Escoda and Ruiz-Poveda, 2026). The relations of

algorithms and possible rabbit holes on social media and their impact on shaping the views of Generation Z are vastly unexplored, which gives a great opportunity for future research.

Finally, subsequent studies could incorporate different sections and compare them to intergenerational frameworks. Youth cohorts are not ideologically uniform. Future frameworks should systematically incorporate control variables and subgroup analyses based on:

Societal and Ideological Subgroups: How political self-identification (left vs. right) and religious backgrounds create and boost opinion-making.

Socio-Demographic Factors: The role of educational levels and gender.

Spatial Variables: The difference between threat perception and economic divergences between urban centres and rural places of residence.

10. Conclusion

This thesis evaluates how Generation Z in the European Union perceives sanctions that were put on the Russian Federation by the European Union after Russian aggression on Ukraine. Thesis moves away from binary support: against opposition, but rather dives deep into reasons for various opinions from the first digitally native generation. The data shows us that support for the sanction is traditionally equally high across the whole European Union, but the motivations vary. Motivations for support are mostly shaped by geographical location and inherited historical memory.

Research confirms that geographical location works as a multiplier of fear of the threat of a possible conflict. EU nations were divided into two sub-groups. Those included: close and far from the borders with the Russian Federation. Respondents from the close states view the conflict as a possible existential threat and approach it with higher urgency than respondents from far states. On the contrary, respondents from far states interpret the full-scale invasion from a more detached, geopolitical lens, therefore having smaller personal concern despite high support for sanctions regardless.

Data shows a phenomenon about close states. Despite the fact that Generation Z in the eastern and central parts of the European Union has not personally lived through the hardship that the Russian Federation/USSR caused, respondents are crucially aware of the historical ties between Russia and their home countries. This awareness was inherited from the respondent's family as well as the nation's society. Due to this intergenerational trauma, the event of Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022 is seen as a repeated occurrence rather

than a new experience. Intergenerational trauma and higher awareness towards the Russian Federation are among the biggest motivations behind support for the sanctions against Russia. It also explains why respondents from the close states are willing to keep sanctions long-term, even if it hurts their wallets and standard of living.

The majority of scholars agree that sanctions have one main function, which is either a moral or an economic one (Giumelli, 2011). Most of our respondents, regardless of their sub-region, believed that the sanctions that were used on the Russian Federation have more of an economic function. On the other hand, when the respondents were asked if they could name specific examples, many struggled. Data shows that even though most respondents believe that sanctions are mostly an economic instrument, their motivation for supporting them is mainly moral. Democratic governments and entities can freely use sanctions only when the general public is in favour. The democratic system often supports short-termism, and governments need their voters to support them to maintain power. Our data shows that support across Europe is profoundly high, and Generation Z is more than willing to sacrifice parts of their lifestyle for maintaining sanctions for several years. Many respondents even mentioned that they would prefer stricter sanctions, even if it would hit their wallets more. The findings suggest that Generation Z is prepared to accept personal economic hardship, as Generation Z believes that it is their moral obligation to support sanctions against Russia and maintain the European Union as the normative hegemon.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the literature by focusing on the under-researched topic of Generation Z, mainly through a qualitative lens. It demonstrates that threat perception is not just about the aggregate power of the nations, but also about the geographical proximity and the stories one inherits. For Generation Z, sanctions are not viewed just as an economic tool, but as a way of taking an ethical responsibility in an increasingly polarised world.

11. AI Usage Overview

The development of this thesis was supported by the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, including models like Gemini 1.5 Pro and OpenAI's GPT-5.3 model.

AI was used mainly at the beginning of the process, as it has acted as a helpful partner for brainstorming and ideation. It also assisted in mapping out possible research directions,

exploring different theoretical and analytical angles, and helped to organise broad initial concepts into a more focused and structured research topic.

During the data collection phase, AI played a more technical role. It was used to turn qualitative interviews into written text. While this was a massive help in saving time, it was recognised that AI can often make mistakes and miss specific nuances. The interviews were later manually checked word-for-word while listening to the original audio recordings.

In the final stages of writing, AI served as a helper and editor. It has helped to refine language and correct grammatical mistakes. It has also helped to double-check that citations and references followed correct formatting rules.

Beyond direct writing support, AI was also vital as a help with project management. It was used to create timelines, and task schedules. The planning of work was also supported by AI. That has helped to manage project progression more effectively.

It is important to clarify that while these tools were assisting in refining and organising, they did not generate the content of this research. All ideas, interpretations, and final decisions remained the responsibility of the authors. Every suggestion provided by an AI tool was carefully reviewed and adjusted to match the authors' preferences and findings. This thesis remains a true reflection of independent research, with AI serving as a supportive tool.

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